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BREAKING BAD

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HAS IT REALLY been (almost) two years since we left Canto Bight and last saw the possible future of the Resistance with broom brandished? *The Last Jedi* was unmistakably a bold piece of filmmaking from Rian Johnson and one that was unmistakably met with both love and loud disagreement. Now, 20 months on and we're about to go again! Strap yourself in! But wait: this time, things are a little different. J.J. Abrams is back, after answering a call from producer and president of Lucasfilm Kathleen Kennedy, and now finds himself tasked with the mammoth job of finishing the Skywalker saga. It's quite the gig, and one that the director does not take lightly, the ghost of George Lucas on one shoulder and the voice of the fans on the other. Our *Star Wars* obsessive James Dyer — who was on the set of *The Empire Strikes Back* as a child; has he mentioned that recently? — spoke to Abrams, Kennedy and writer Chris Terrio for the very first word anywhere on the new film. Plus, we have a raft of never-before-seen pictures and two world-exclusive covers to collect. Spoiler: if you put them together, they create one jaw-dropping image. Almost two years. You ready? We sure as hell are.



Terri
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INSIDE THE MAGAZINE THIS MONTH



Empire Features Editor Nick de Semlyen flew out to New York earlier this year to enjoy an audience with the legendary Martin Scorsese. At no point was he told to go home and get his shinebox. Read the career-spanning interview on page 92.

THE EMPIRE PODCAST GOES ON TOUR



Like a podcast version of *Spinal Tap*, the *Empire* Podcast kicked off its first ever UK tour with a sold-out show at the London Podcast Festival, featuring special guest Colin Trevorrow. And no mini-Stonehenge in sight.

THE PILOT TV PODCAST'S DEBUT LIVE SHOW



The *Pilot TV* Podcast escaped the confines of the pod booth for the first time with a spirited debut live show; guest Russell Tovey (seen here cuddling Boyd Hilton) shared some brilliantly X-rated anecdotes. Listen to the full episode online now.



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CONTENTS



TAKE 20

10 EL CAMINO

Aaron Paul on the year's nicest surprise — a *Breaking Bad* spin-off movie following the exploits of Jesse Pinkman. He is the one who stands next to the one who knocks.

14 LITTLE MONSTERS

The first look at Lupita Nyong'o kicking ass and taking brains in the goretastic Aussie zomcom.

16 PINT OF MILK

Naomie Harris tackles the hardest question of her career: just who is the most famous person she can text right now? We've gone full Paxman.

24 TRAILER TALK

Team *Empire* talks about the trailer for *Bad Boys For Life*. This shit just got realer.

30 MULAN

On set of the latest Disney live-action animation adaptation. Really need to work on that hashtag. It's a lot.

FEATURES

62 THE RISE OF SKYWALKER

Whether it's slaughtering a group of defenceless Tusken Raiders, or lopping the arm off a giant furry creature operating purely on instinct, the joyful adventures of the Skywalker family have had us transfixed for decades. It all ends here, with J.J. Abrams' *Star Wars Episode IX*. Odds on Force Ghost Luke killing a herd of Bantha just for kicks? 10-1.

70 JAY & SILENT BOB REBOOT

Just over a year ago, Kevin Smith almost died. Thankfully he didn't, and now he's back, strong like bull, and bringing his most beloved characters with him.

76 KEN LOACH

Empire once saw Ken coming out of Forbidden Planet. Presumably he'd gone in there to look at an early *Thor* comic called *I, Donald Blake*.

82 MOTHERLESS BROOKLYN

Edward Norton writes exclusively for *Empire* on his first film as director since *Keeping The Faith* in 2000. That's a long time to keep the faith.

86 KNIVES OUT

Rian Johnson tells us how he planned the perfect murder, and would have got away with it if it hadn't been for that meddling *Empire*.

92 MARTIN SCORSESE

It's a Marty party as *Empire* sits down with our latest #Empire30 director. You may have heard of him.

102 EYES WIDE SHUT

An oral history of the infamous orgy scene from Kubrick's final film.

Above: Oscar Isaac and John Boyega enjoy comparing hands on the set of *The Rise Of Skywalker*. Below: John Wick (Keanu Reeves): another gripping chapter.



ON SCREEN

36 JOKER

Todd Phillips and Joaquin Phoenix's laugh-a-minute tale of a loveable clown.

42 JUDY

Will Renée Zellweger soon be Garland-ed with awards?

53 SPOILERSECTION

In which we ruin *It Chapter Two* and *The Dark Crystal*.

REVIEW

108 JOHN WICK: CHAPTER 3 — PARABELLUM

Director Chad Stahelski on the ultimate hit, man.

120 ROCKETMAN

Dexter Fletcher has the Dwight stuff.

122 THE RANKING

1989 movies? That's far too many.

WHAT WHISKY'S BEEN WAITING FOR



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COMMENT OF THE MONTH

THE WIZARD OF OZ

Sincere congrats on 30 years of epic goodness. Over three decades, living on four continents, working various jobs, *Empire* was invariably on my couch or bedside table, in my backpack or work satchel. I'll never forget the thrill of discovering *Empire* (Hellboy cover, Issue 225, March '08) on a newsstand in Saigon. I celebrated my 50th recently in a backyard festooned with dozens of posters from *Empire*. To quote arguably the best 007 song, nobody does it better, *Empire*. You're the best.

DAVID HOLMES, BRISBANE

Wow, thanks David. Please accept these Picturehouse memberships for 11 years of loyalty. Worth coming back here just to use, we reckon.

SEND IN THE CLOWNS

Regarding your review given to *It Chapter Two*, I think giving it five stars was the correct choice. It's jam-packed with love, mystery and scares. I think I peed myself during the mirror-room scene. Andy Muschietti obviously did his job right.

ALEX GREEN, VIA EMAIL

We will neither confirm nor deny whether we too peed ourselves, but we won't be going near balloons any time soon. Or Chinese restaurants. Or towns. Or anything, basically.



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COLIN'S [TREVORROW]
RETURN TO THE FOLD IN
THE DIRECTOR'S CHAIR.

JAMES METHERELL

MANE MAN

Matthias Schoenaerts' electrifying performance in *The Mustang* is so captivating that it must be the role to — at last — bring this extraordinary actor the wider recognition that he richly deserves. I feel that so much of Mr Schoenaerts' work in smaller, character-driven pieces has gone lamentably underseen in limited releases. Hopefully this role will be the one to change that.

KEVIN STEWART, COUNTY CARLOW, IRELAND

Whatever creature he works with, be it a horse (The Mustang), a cow (Bullhead), a killer whale (Rust And Bone) or Tom Hardy (The Drop), he always holds his own. Check him out next in Terrence Malick's latest, A Hidden Life.



CLASS ACT
THE ARTICLE BY @ADEWALE
IN @EMPIREMAGAZINE
COMPLETELY CAPTURED MY
ATTENTION. I CAN'T IMAGINE
HOW CATHARTIC/
CHALLENGING IT WAS TO MAKE
#FARMING. FAIR PLAY, SIR.

@JEFFREYBALL

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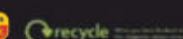
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THE TAKE

THIS MONTH'S FILM MOMENTS THAT MATTER [EDITED BY JOHN NUGENT]

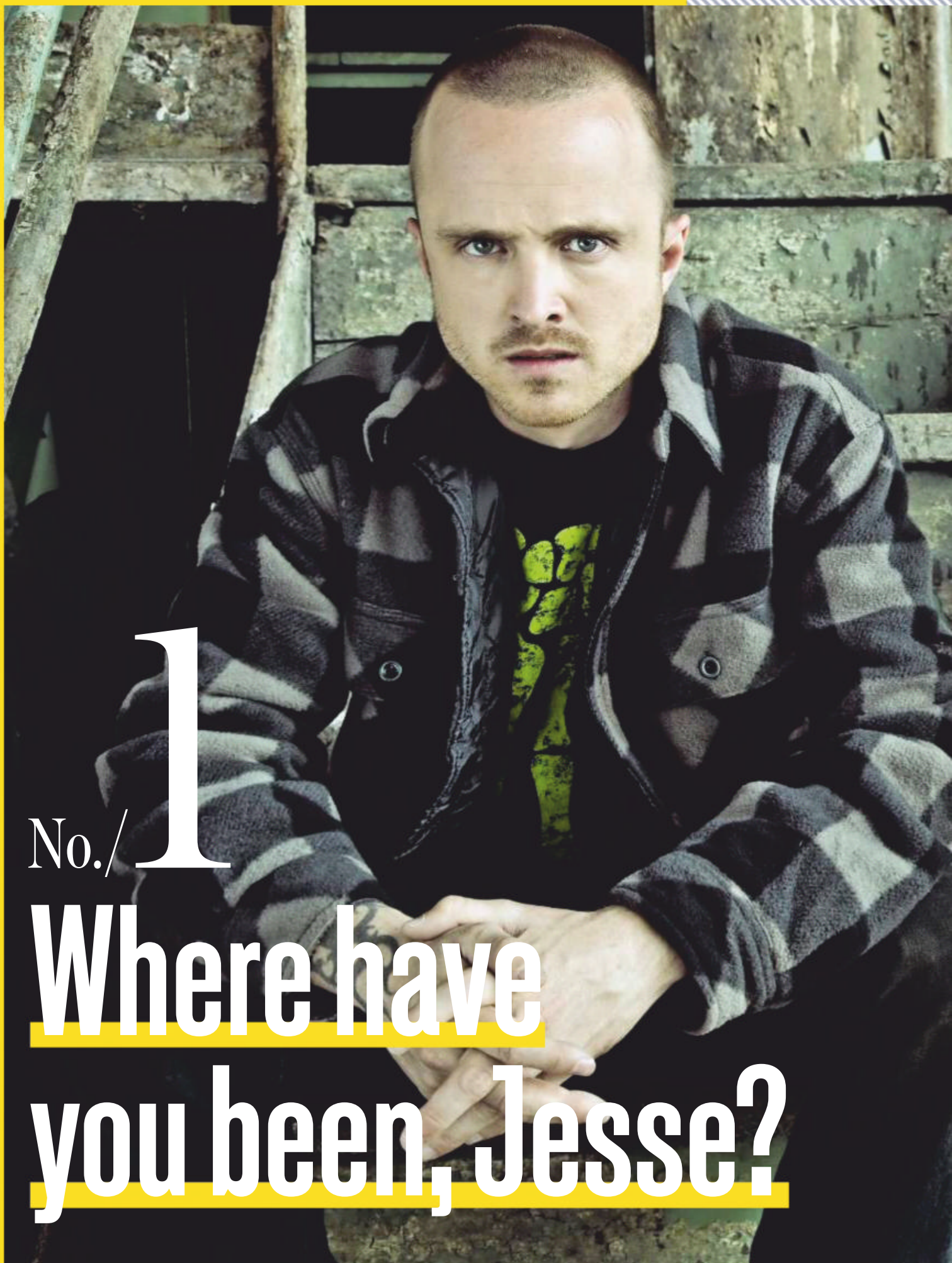
No. 1 Where have you been, Jesse?

Star **AARON PAUL** on the “adrenaline ride” of bringing Jesse Pinkman back in *Breaking Bad* movie *El Camino*

AARON PAUL THINKS *Breaking Bad* ended “perfectly”. When we last saw his character — meth-cooking, magnet-loving Jesse Pinkman — he was ragged, scarred and reeling from his enslavement by Uncle Jack’s neo-Nazi gang, speeding off into the night, high on freedom. Jesse’s story was done. Paul was satisfied. “My God, did he pay for his sins inside that buried cage,” he tells *Empire*. Yet, he says, during the subsequent years, “People kept asking me: ‘What happened to Jesse?’ Although I loved how it was left unclear, I’m glad that now...” He pauses and chuckles. “... it’s a little less so.”

That clarity comes courtesy of the movie *El Camino*, written and directed by *Breaking Bad* creator Vince Gilligan. Remarkably, it was shot completely under the radar last November in Albuquerque, New Mexico. “People would ask me, ‘What are you doing out here?’, and I would say, ‘Oh I’m just making this small little indie,’” Paul says. “No-one questioned it. Not one person thought, ‘Oh this must be a *Breaking Bad* movie.’”

Its existence was only publicly hinted at when Bryan Cranston (aka meth-cooking chemistry teacher Walter White) and Bob





Left: *El Camino* is not about Jesse (Aaron Paul) being locked out of his gaff for six years. Or is it? **Below:** *Bad boys* Bryan Cranston (Walt), Paul and director Vince Gilligan.



Odenkirk (aka dodgy lawyer Saul Goodman) let slip about the project in a couple of interviews. Even now, when we chat just a month before it drops on Netflix, the story remains tightly shrouded in mystery and Paul isn't about to break ranks. It's clear we'll be seeing Jesse back on his dusty home turf, but Paul does at least hint we may be picking up with him some time after his escape: "All I can say is the journey is really post-*Breaking Bad*, and what happened after speeding away in that *El Camino*."

Gilligan first gauged Paul's interest in returning as Jesse in early 2018, while planning *Breaking Bad*'s tenth anniversary reunion. "He told me he thought he had come up with an idea of where to take the story and he asked, 'Would you be into re-exploring that character?'" It was an instant yes from the actor, who says he would "follow Vince into a fire". But Gilligan was adamant he "wouldn't want to do it unless it made sense. Unless it felt perfect."

Evidently, perfection was achieved a few months later, when he invited Paul to his office to read the script. "My jaw was on the floor," Paul says. "I was instantly taken back to this guy. I felt like I was wearing Jesse's skin while reading it. I know this character better than anybody, and to see what happened after that final moment was an adrenaline ride from beginning to end."

Though Paul has changed a lot since he last played Jesse (he is now married, with a "beautiful baby girl"), he didn't find it hard to slip back into Jesse's hoodie. "It was like revisiting an old, dear friend that I really care about," he says. "That might sound odd, but as someone who's played this guy for so long, you start to get this emotional attachment. And I think Vince did a perfect job of keeping it as genuine as possible, so those emotions you're feeling are, I think, as honest as they can be."

Speaking of old, dear friends, *Empire* wonders if it was strange for Paul, continuing Jesse's story without Cranston. "It wasn't odd for me at all," he says. "I was surrounded by old friends, because most of the crew were the same people that were on the pilot of *Breaking Bad*." While he describes the movie as "another chapter", it didn't feel to him like he was merely making 'Episode 63'. "It felt bigger — and less rushed. People are going to be so amazed at what Vince accomplished. I think they'll be very happy."

If we can safely expect anything of *El Camino*, it's that Gilligan will weave around our expectations just as deftly as he did with every episode of *Breaking Bad*. "A lot of things that we dive into in this film will be pretty shocking," reveals Paul, "and unexpected." There will be, as Gilligan once wrote — and as Paul's own arm tattoo reads — no half-measures. **DAN JOLIN**

EL CAMINO: A BREAKING BAD MOVIE IS ON NETFLIX FROM 11 OCTOBER

No. 2

How Watchmen takes on white supremacy

Showrunner **DAMON LINDELOF** on giving the Alan Moore graphic novel a timely update for TV

THE HERO OF Alan Moore's landmark 1986 graphic novel *Watchmen* was Rorschach, an uncompromising vigilante who'd stop at nothing in his hunt for justice. In Damon Lindelof's HBO continuation of the superhero satire, set 30 years after the original, the character represents pure villainy. "We thought it'd be interesting to show bad guys appropriating Rorschach, twisting and subverting the idea of him to their whims," says the *Lost* co-creator, whose new show sees violent criminals donning Rorschach masks to terrorise "race traitors" and people of colour. Welcome to the new *Watchmen*:



a white supremacy-battling update of a comic book classic, tailor-made for our time of alt-right rallies and sky-rocketing hate crime figures.

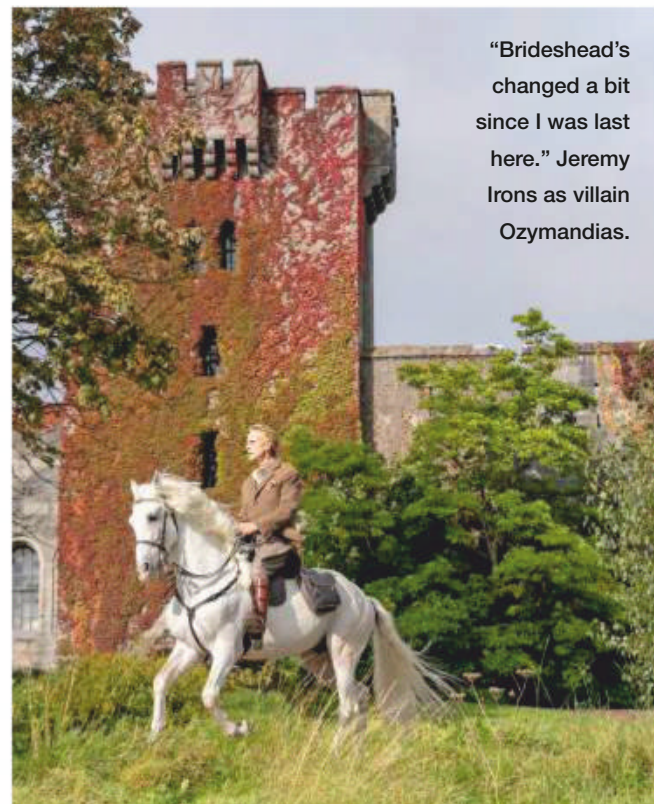
"We talked a lot about racism," says Lindelof, who grew up reading Moore's edgy tales. "*Watchmen* really tapped into the fear everyone was experiencing as a result of the nuclear stand-off between the US and Russia at the time. Superhero stories were supposed to take place in Metropolis or Gotham City — not real places.

But this took place in New York and the political climate very much mirrored ours." When he started developing his own version of *Watchmen*, he wanted it to similarly grapple with urgent social issues.

"I asked, what's the thing that's causing a tremendous amount of anxiety in America today? The only authentic answer was race."

"It's a very aggressive, dark world right now," agrees director Nicole Kassell, who has close personal attachment to the show's themes: she grew up in Charlottesville, Virginia, where

Regina King is ready to kick some butt in new HBO series *Watchmen*. Bottom, inset: Showrunner Damon Lindelof.



"Brideshead's changed a bit since I was last here." Jeremy Irons as villain Ozymandias.

"overt racism made me not feel safe" long before the alt-right parade that shocked America and left one person dead in 2017. "We wanted to say something sincere about that, to react to what's been happening."

Rorschach's evolution into a poster boy for violent bigots in this HBO show has real-life precedence. In the years since Moore's graphic novel, and Zack Snyder's 2009 movie adaptation, the character has been championed by right-wing figures: in 2015, controversial US politician Ted Cruz listed him as one of his favourite superheroes. "I don't wanna editorialise on whether or not Rorschach was a white supremacist. I don't think he was, but he certainly had what would now be considered some alt-right views," says Lindelof. "We wanted to explore that." *Watchmen*, as we know it, is about to be turned upside down. **AL HORNER**

WATCHMEN IS ON SKY ATLANTIC AND NOW TV FROM 21 OCTOBER

Alamy, Getty Images

SMALL
TALKSIENNA
MILLERWhat's the last great thing
that you watched?

I think *Fleabag* is exquisite. I love Phoebe Waller-Bridge — she's flawless. It's so relieving to see that kind of truthfulness and authenticity on screen. I watch it and just feel this immense relief for our species. Also, *The Souvenir*. I love the world that Joanna Hogg creates in that film.

What's a dish that
you enjoy cooking
for people?

I cooked my mum a great Filipino chicken stew recently. And steak. A good British steak. None of that American meat.

How have you spent
the summer?

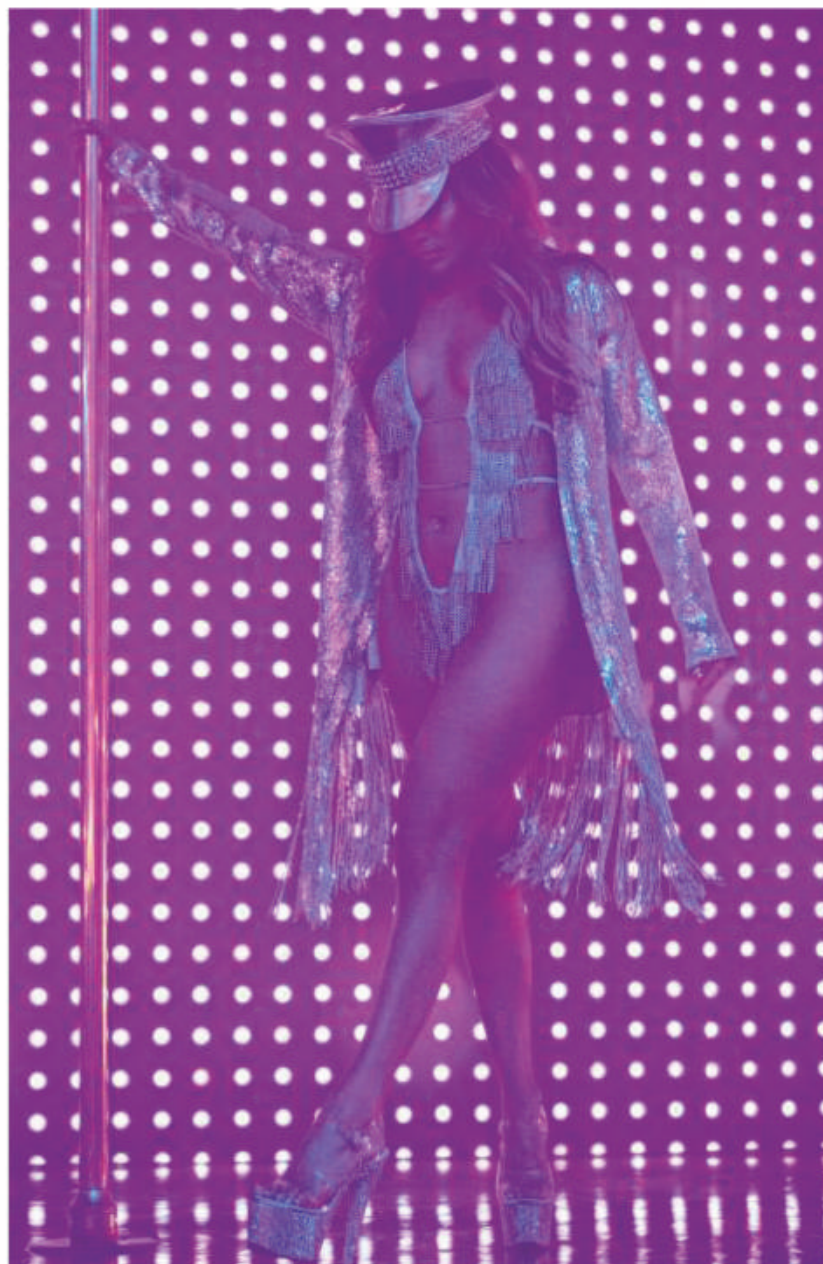
I had the full British experience! I've got a cottage outside of London so I've been there blackberry-picking and swimming in ponds. There's nothing like England in the summer. I went to Wimbledon and Glastonbury as well.

Who did you see
at Glastonbury?

I saw Stormzy, The Killers and some random smaller bands. Friends of mine run The Rabbit Hole, which is this mad place with amazing DJs that I wandered around. It's just so British — I miss that irreverence living in New York. **BETH WEBB**

AMERICAN WOMAN IS IN CINEMAS

FROM 11 OCTOBER

No./3
It's time to
re-evaluate
J.Lo

Hustlers has given **Jennifer Lopez** the best reviews of her career — but then, she's always been underestimated

WE'VE FALLEN PREY to one of the classic early 2000s pop blunders: we've all been fooled by the rocks that Jennifer Lopez has got. The star's Oscar-buzzed role in *Hustlers* is a welcome reminder that Lopez is far from just tabloid fodder: she's a hell of an actress.

Lopez's first leading role and breakthrough performance was 1997's *Selena*, playing the talented, tragic Tejano pop star, putting her on Hollywood's radar and kickstarting her music career. In *Out Of Sight* (1998) she and George Clooney burned up the screen as they matched wits and charisma. But (as with *Hustlers*) her strength there is not only in sex appeal but in substance; her US marshal is a focussed, confident career woman who knows exactly what she wants, even when her desires conflict with her job. Lopez then became the first woman to have a simultaneous US number one album and film (respectively *J.Lo* and

The Wedding Planner, a performance and film underrated even by the standards of an unfairly derided genre). Unlike many of her contemporaries, especially in romcoms, Lopez often chose to play working-class characters and self-made women, and she has the screen presence to show their authority even when the world ignores it.

After that 2001 high point, she sometimes gave in to the temptation for frothy, commercial fare over showier acting roles (like her *Wedding Planner* co-star, Matthew McConaughey). She was great in edgier films like *The Cell*, but her mainstay was the romcom, and her career seemed to decline with the genre — though 2018's *Second Act* showed she's still a cinema draw **with** the right comedic performance.

But how did we let her step back from serious films for this long? **Where** the heck were Hollywood's biggest directors? Perhaps they were worried by all the focus on her private life. **It's** a strange paradox of the film industry that star quality and acting talent **must** go hand-in-hand, but rarely make **easy** bedfellows. A public image doesn't **help** when transforming chameleonicallly for a role, and Lopez is one of those **who** became famous for her fame as **much** as her films. Maybe it's time to **look** past the pop-star dazzle and **remind** ourselves that — to misquote another lyric — she's real. **HELEN O'HARA**

Clockwise from above: Jennifer Lopez as Ramona, stealing the show in *Hustlers*; Underrated in 2001's *The Wedding Planner*; As Dr Catherine Deane in trippy sci-fi *The Cell* (2000).



No. 4 Little Monsters

[FIRST LOOK]

LUPITA NYONG'O makes her first (extremely bloody) comedy

SHE'S FACED DOWN terrorists in *Black Panther* and the Tethered in *Us*. Now Lupita Nyong'o is taking on zombies. The new zomcom *Little Monsters* sees the actor as an elementary school teacher fighting the undead, while remaining chipper and cheerful for the nippers. Only her second lead role proper since winning an Oscar for 2013's *12 Years A Slave*, it's hopefully a sign that Nyong'o is finally enjoying the movie star status she richly deserves (and destroying a few brains while she's at it). **JOHN NUGENT**

LITTLE MONSTERS IS IN CINEMAS FROM 15 NOVEMBER



Clockwise from main: Things look a bit tense for kindergarten teacher Miss Caroline (Lupita Nyong'o); Everyone felt like a zombie on the first day back to work...; Surely somebody had a wet wipe?

No./5 How His Dark Materials got HBO-ed

After a disappointing movie, what is the BBC/HBO TV adaptation doing differently?

BY ALL ACCOUNTS, Ruth Wilson is perfect casting as *His Dark Materials*' Mrs Coulter. *Empire* tells her so. "I'm slightly offended by that," she says. "Considering she's described as the mother of all evils — 'a cesspit of moral filth'." That's not what we took from it. "Well, that's what I take from it!" she says, mock-horrified. "No, it's great. She's a brilliant character."

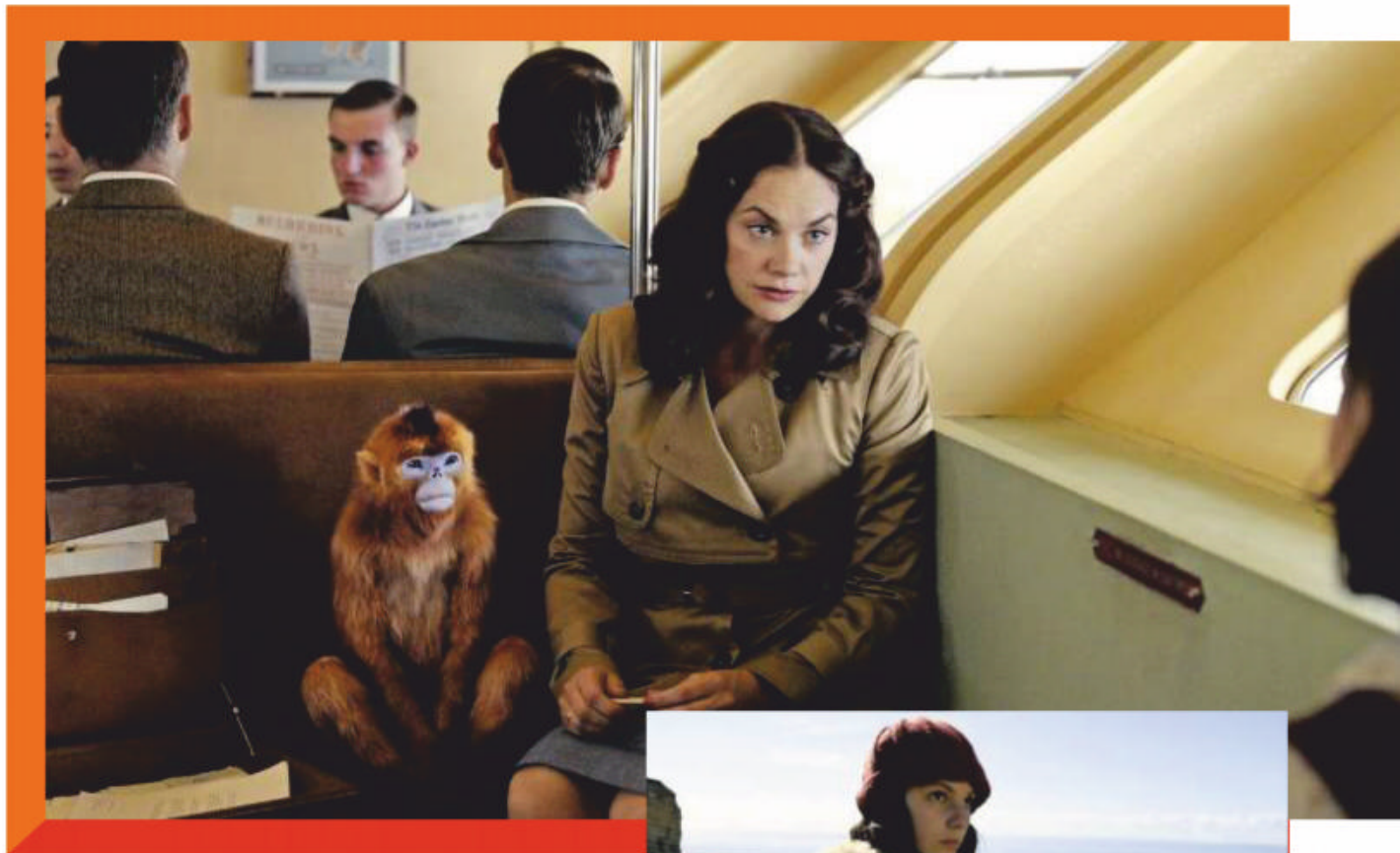
She is — and now, thanks to a lavish BBC/HBO series adapting Philip Pullman's epic literary saga, she'll get her due. Finally. 2007's *The Golden Compass*, starring Nicole Kidman as Mrs Coulter, was the first and last in a planned cinematic trilogy taking on the books, a limp disappointment, but the new series aims to put things right. "Several key landmarks in television have enabled me to be able to position *His Dark Materials* in a way that allows it to be exactly the piece that it is," says executive producer Jane Tranter, citing *Game Of Thrones*, among others. She'd wanted to televise Pullman's books since their publication. "We're not compromising. It's

an extremely faithful adaptation of the novels."

With a series timescale that allows the story to breathe — rather than the film's explosion of exposition — this take's pacing is in no hurry. "Like any piece of mythology, part of the excitement is the unravelling of it," says Tranter. "You have to have the courage to let an audience wonder."

A more patient telling enables deeper character studies, and Wilson has gone very deep. "There's a truth" to the show, she says, "and the truth lies in all the human relationships." Yet that doesn't mean it isn't epic. "It is part fantastical. It is part *Star Wars*. It's grounded in a reality that we can half recognise, but we have these animals around us all the time, we're on airships, there are polar bears speaking. They're cutting through worlds, blowing up God. It's huge." The age of the big-budget box set might just hit a new milestone. **ALEX GODFREY**

HIS DARK MATERIALS AIRS ON BBC ONE/BBC iPLAYER FROM 3 NOVEMBER



Top to bottom: "Yes, he does bite." The villainous Mrs Coulter (Ruth Wilson) with her monkey daemon; Lyra (Dafne Keen) plus trusty alethiometer; Lord Asriel (James McAvoy) with snow leopard daemon Stelmara.

[TREND REPORT]

No./6 MYTHICAL BIG APES

Far from being elusive, Yetis and Bigfoots are all the rage at the multiplex this year

WORDS **JOHN NUGENT**
ILLUSTRATIONS **BILL MCCONKEY**



MIGO
SMALLFOOT

This spin on the Yeti myth sees Migo, a young ape driven out of his community, determined to prove the existence of humans, or 'smallfoot'. Channing Tatum plays Migo, while Zendaya is Meechee.



EVEREST
ABOMINABLE

Like a cuddly, magic polar bear, Everest is a Yeti more limited in speech than his fellow big apes, but more capable of magical acts. From the makers of *How To Train Your Dragon*, it follows similar beats. 'How To Train Your Yeti', then?



MR LINK
MISSING LINK

Voiced by Zach Galifianakis, Mr Link is probably the stupidest of the crop — but no less adorable. Discovered by adventurer Sir Lionel Frost, Mr Link (aka 'Susan') journeys to the Himalayas to find his Yeti cousins.

PINT
OF
MILKNAOMIE
HARRIS**Do you have a signature dish?**

Yes. It is my vegetarian lasagne. People say when they eat it that it is the best thing that they've ever eaten. Not the *best* thing, actually, that would be a bit much! But the best vegetarian lasagne. My secret ingredient is my jerk seasoning. You put that little Jamaican twist in it. And then three different cheeses.

When were you most starstruck?

Meeting Obama. I went to the White House for a screening of *Mandela*, where I played Winnie Mandela. He is *incredible*. I mean, the magnetism that man has is unlike anything else. I was just so starstruck. I was trying to hide in the background, and he saw me getting some food at this buffet thing, before we went into the screening, and he was like, "Hey, Naomie, fill up your plate!"

What is the worst smell in the world?

I'm gonna say old cat litter. I don't have a cat, but I went to my friend's apartment the other day. She had this cat litter which clearly hadn't been cleaned for a while. Just full of cat poo, basically. And it was in her *bathroom*! I needed to use the bathroom, and in order to use the bathroom, I had to be in there with this cat litter disgustingness.

Have you ever knowingly broken the law?

I stole when I was a kid. I stole some penny sweets. I still feel guilty about it. I felt so guilty at the time. It wasn't even worth it. I didn't even enjoy them when I ate them. I was just like, "This is really wrong. Why did I do that?"

What one thing do you do better than anyone else?

I'm the fastest to change. As soon as they say, "Cut," and wrap for the day, I can be out of my costume in seconds. You're supposed to be met by the ADs [assistant directors] and they give you a call sheet for the next day. But I'm normally so fast they don't catch me. The faster you get out, the faster you get home, and then you get an extra ten minutes' sleep.

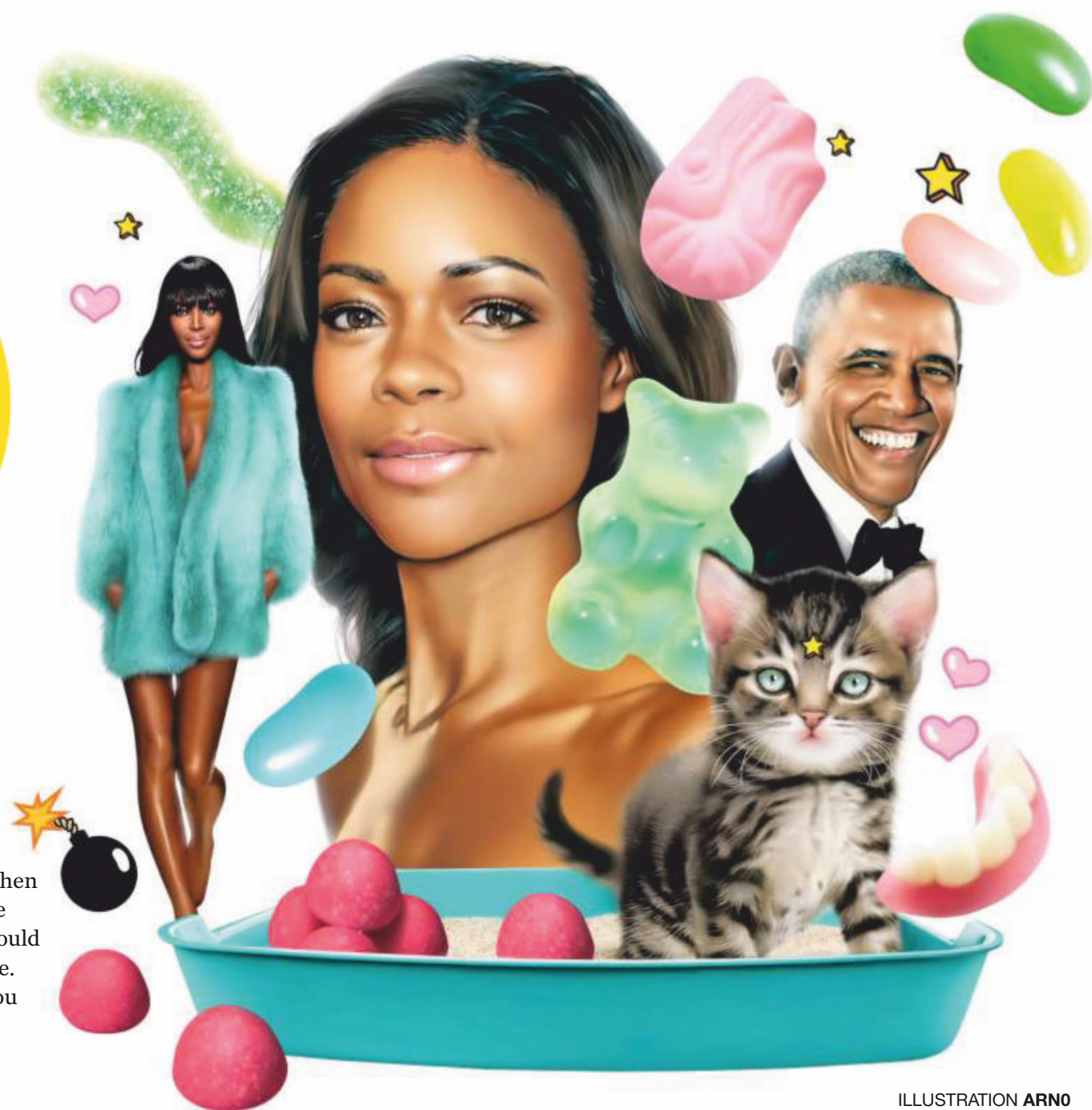


ILLUSTRATION ARNO

Do you have a favourite joke?

No, because I'm terrible at telling jokes. I'm the worst joke-teller ever. I would kill a joke dead.

Which movie have you seen the most?

The Sound Of Music. I love *The Sound Of Music*. It's a perfect movie to watch when it's cold and rainy and you just want to snuggle up on the sofa with a film.

Do you have any scars?

Yes. I have quite a few scars, actually. I have scoliosis. I have a metal rod in my spine, so I have a scar all the way along my back. To get

to my spine, they had to remove a rib, so that was a massive scar. And then they had to collapse my lungs. So that was another scar. War wounds! I was 15, so it was a long time ago. It's all good now. But pretty major, right?

Who is the most famous person you could text right now?

Naomi Campbell.

What scares you?

Strangely enough, the dark. It's weird, because I should be over that by now. But as soon as it turns dark, I'm like, "Oh, gosh, it's the scary time! Where are the lights?" It's just my imagination. I need to check where the light switch is in every hotel room.

What is the best thing you've stolen from a hotel?

I'm not one of these hotel stealers. I'm a really bad packer. My suitcase is so crammed by the time I get anywhere that there's no room for anything else. Actually, that's not true. When I was in Jamaica, I stole an amazing tie-dye dressing gown. But they would have just put it on my bill so it's not really stealing.

How much is a pint of milk?

50p. I don't drink milk. I just Googled it before. I didn't want to be caught out on that one question! I did my research.

JOHN NUGENT

COMING SOON

NO TIME TO DIE
(2020)

Harris will play MI6 stalwart Eve Moneypenny for the third time in the latest 007 movie, Eon Productions' 25th Bond film — and Daniel Craig's swansong as the legendary spy.

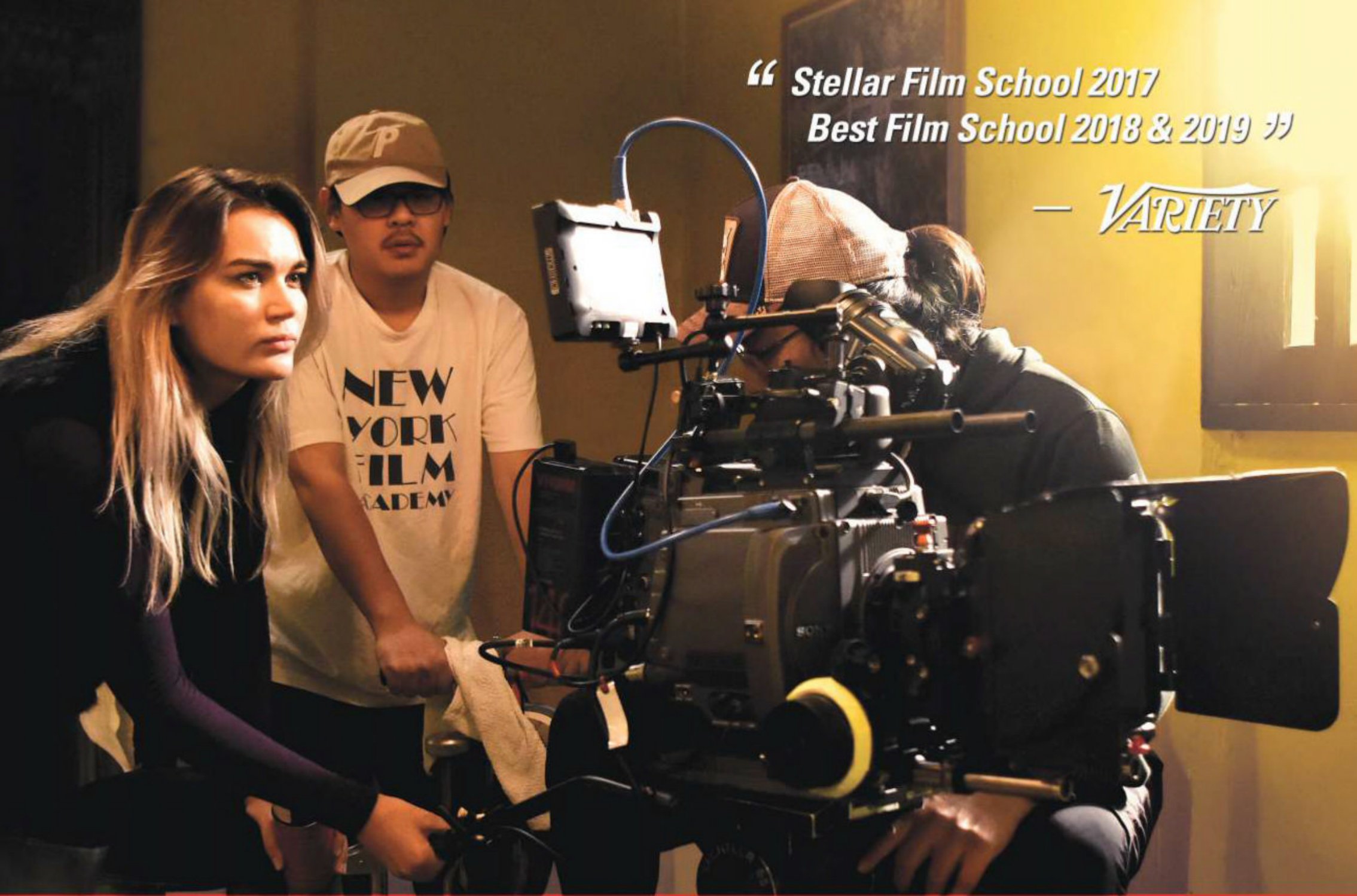
THE THIRD DAY
(2020)

This surreal TV drama, set on a mysterious island off the coast of Britain, has an all-star cast, with Harris starring alongside Jude Law, Paddy Considine, Katherine Waterston and Emily Watson.

BLACK AND BLUE IS IN CINEMAS FROM 25 OCTOBER

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No. 7 From hidden gems — to Oscar glory

With a glimpse of the future at this year's film festivals, three *Empire* writers offer their awards picks



MARRIAGE STORY BEST PICTURE

NICK DE SEMLYEN
(at Toronto International Film Festival)

Movies about divorce aren't meant to be this entertaining. 1979 Best Picture Oscar-winner *Kramer Vs Kramer*, for example, is an intelligent and moving piece of work, but there's less fun in its entire run-time than in the joke at its expense in *The Return Of Spinal Tap*, where schlocky

filmmaker Marty DiBergi reveals he made a sequel called *Kramer Vs Kramer Vs Godzilla*. This year's *Marriage Story*, on the other hand, is a triumphant blend of comedy and drama, finding the absurdity as well as the melancholy in what occurs when partners consciously uncouple. It even has Adam Driver singing Stephen Sondheim, something very few films this year can claim.

Noah Baumbach has tackled relationships before, and specifically divorce in *The Squid And The Whale*. But judging by how it's played at the Venice and Toronto film festivals, *Marriage Story* looks set to be the his first film to go mainstream. It has two big stars (Driver, Scarlett Johansson) at the peak of their powers, juicy supporting roles for Laura Dern and Ray Liotta as duelling lawyers, tear-jerking scenes, and a hilarious bit involving a Swiss Army knife. In short, don't be surprised to see this following *Kramer Vs Kramer*'s lead and nabbing Best Picture. And then, if we're lucky, a sequel drafting in *Godzilla*.



BABYTEETH BEST SUPPORTING ACTRESS

CHRISTINA NEWLAND
(at Venice Film Festival)

A devastating and surprisingly fresh take on the teen-with-cancer drama, Shannon Murphy's *Babyteeth* features a stunning turn from Essie Davis as Anna, a woman coming apart at the seams after her daughter's cancer diagnosis.

The film's primary perspective comes from teenager Milla (Eliza Scanlen) — but Davis proves to be the emotional flashpoint. Her relationship with her teen runs the razor's edge from intense need to antipathy, and she vacillates between Xanax-induced calm and spells of absolute blind terror in the face of an illness beyond her control. As a woman working hard to maintain the parameters of parental control, Davis is a heartbreakingly real reminder



ILLUSTRATION JACEY

of the bond between a mother and daughter.

Her performance is so finely tuned, so dramatically ripe, and somehow never milked for sentiment. She is a woman working hard to maintain the parameters of parental control — and still make space for her daughter's happiness during a precarious time. Davis is the unforgettable lynchpin of the film. She amply deserves a nomination.



**FOR SAMA
BEST
DOCUMENTARY**
ALEX GODFREY
(at Cannes Film Festival)

At film festivals, where the big hitters and the unknown underdogs are all thrown into the melange, only quality matters. It was so inspiring then, at Cannes this year, for a film made by

someone who'd never done so before — hadn't even intended to — to get so much buzz.

As presented on festival paraphernalia, *For Sama* was a documentary with a high-concept angle — a woman (Waad al-Kateab) in Aleppo and her doctor husband have a baby whilst her city is ravaged, filming everything, the mother dedicating the footage to her new daughter. It sounded interesting. It was extraordinary.

For Sama is one of those rare films you implore everybody you know to see, not because it's important, but because it takes hold of you and doesn't let go. Al-Kateab began shooting simply to document life, and as such, *For Sama* is the purest film: like home video, structured as an endlessly dramatic tragedy. It's already travelled so far, but you want to see these people on the biggest stage of all. They are genuinely heroic, and what they've done, both in Aleppo and with this immense film since, deserves endless accolades.

No./8

THE THREE WILDEST SIGHTS AT D23

THIS YEAR'S DISNEY
CONVENTION CONJURED
UP SOME PRETTY
OUT-THERE COSPLAYERS



SAMURAI DARTH VADER

With both a lightsaber and
a samurai sword



TRON LIGHTCYCLE

Which must have been
a nightmare to go to
the toilet in



MICKEY MOUSE GLOVES

Offering the unique possibility
of a hand-hug

No. 9

The Pixar-ification of fantasy

How Pixar's new fable **ONWARD** reimagines elves, trolls and unicorns as everyday suburbia

"YEAH, I DON'T know a lot about fantasy!" It's a brave thing for director Dan Scanlon to admit, given he's about to complete animation on *Onward*, Pixar's first high fantasy film. The setting, a fairy-tale world given a modern-day spin, originated with an idea about two sons looking to bring their late father back to life for one day with magic. "Luckily," Scanlon says, "there's a lot of fantasy fans here [at Pixar] to educate me." Here, he introduces *Onward*'s fantastical multi-species world.

UNICORNS

Usually the most mysterious and majestic of fantasy creatures, unicorns in *Onward* are basically just common pests. "We thought, 'If the world's changed and magic's gone away, maybe unicorns are everywhere? What if they've become a little bit like raccoons or squirrels?'" Part of the subversive fun Scanlon has is to reevaluate what magic is. "There are so many magical things in our world that we take for granted. Nature is pretty magical, but we're used to it!"

ELVES

The heroes of the tale are Ian and Barley Lightfoot (voiced by Tom Holland and Chris Pratt respectively), two elves who embark on a quest to find some long-lost magic and spend one



Above: Teenage elf brothers Ian (Tom Holland) and Barley (Chris Pratt) Lightfoot. **Left:** In this world of dwindling magic, unicorns show their urban fox side. **Below:** Ian with pet dragon Blazey.

more day with their late father. "It's this grand quest, set in the suburban modern world," Scanlon explains. "I mean, the boys aren't riding in on a horse, like you're used to. They're riding in a van, with a horse painted on the side of it."

DRAGONS

Like any self-respecting fantasy, *Onward* has fire-breathing dragons — but *Game Of Thrones*, this ain't. "In our universe, dragons were domesticated over time, like wolves were domesticated into dogs. [The family's] dragon is named Blazey, and she's a sweet little Labrador-like dragon. She can still kick up some flame now and then, but it's the equivalent of barking." A minor fire hazard, perhaps, but mostly adorable.

MANTICORES

Part of their quest will involve having to find

the 'Phoenix Gem', which will help them resurrect their father. And in order to find the gem, they must first find the Manticore (voiced by Octavia Spencer). "What even is a Manticore?" laughs Scanlon. "It's too much stuff, smashed together! The Manticore is a lion, a scorpion, a bat, and a human. I love the awkward nature of that. It lent itself to comedy really well."

TROLLS

The film has fun subverting plenty of other fantasy tropes: as well as gardener gnomes and jogging centaurs, *Onward* features trolls manning an ordinary bridge toll booth, payable by either "cash or riddle" in a blink-and-you'll-miss-it visual gag. "I'm glad you noticed that," chuckles Scanlon. "That's the fun of it — finding that mix of fantasy and everyday, and asking the question: if people used to have magic, what replaced it?"

JOHN NUGENT

ONWARD IS IN CINEMAS FROM 6 MARCH 2020



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No. 10

Finding the myths
behind the madnessDirector Robert Eggers on what inspired
his hypnotic horror **THE LIGHTHOUSE**

ROBERT EGGERS is a stickler for period detail. His 17th century-set supernatural horror *The Witch* was eerily authentic, borne of going neck deep into New England Puritans and their supernatural fears. For his follow-up *The Lighthouse*, an absurdist 1890-set drama starring Robert Pattinson and Willem Dafoe, he doubled-down. Surrounded by piles of books about lighthouses and their keepers in his personal study, Eggers tells *Empire* where he went to find what he was looking for.

THE LIGHTHOUSES

"It was much easier to find evidence of the material world for this than *The Witch*," says Eggers, revelling in the relative modernity of 1890. "Craig Lathrop, the production designer, found many archives of blueprints of lighthouses." For the film, Eggers wanted to feature a Fresnel lens — which delivers the lamp's beam — so he and cinematographer Jarin Blaschke visited a 1909 Californian lighthouse which has such a lens. "It was truly hypnotic," he



says. "We could have stayed there all night just staring at the thing."

THE KEEPERS

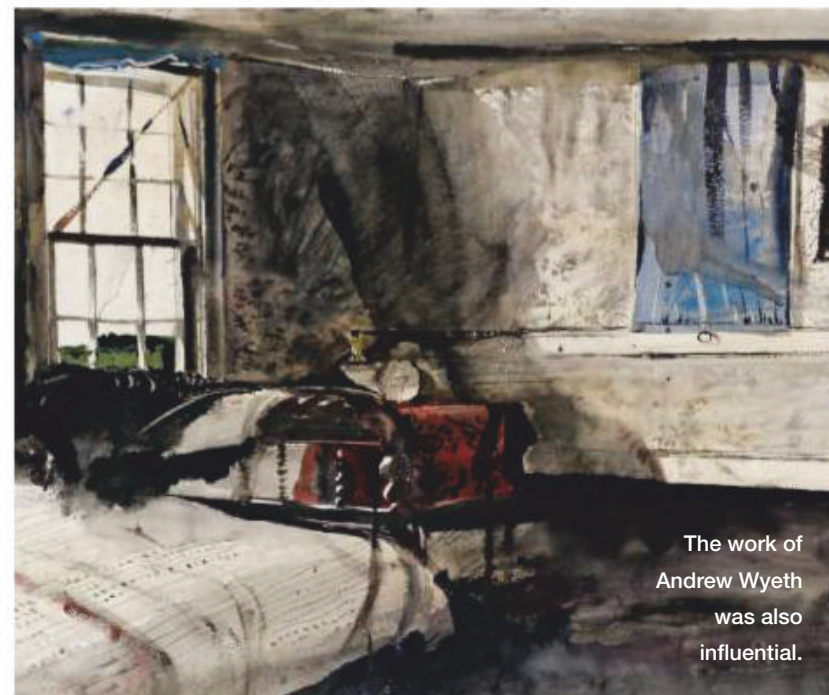
To research lighthouse keepers — aka 'wickies' — Eggers unearthed original documentation. "There's a lighthouse keepers' manual on the internet," he says. "But we also found old diaries and logbooks." One exchange gave him "ammunition" for the story he and his co-screenwriter brother had already begun. "It was

an argument between this lighthouse keeper and his assistant, with the assistant complaining about all the horrible things he'd done. One of the lines was, 'I do not feel safe with him.'"

THE PAINTERS

For visual references, Eggers looked to Pennsylvania painter Andrew Wyeth. "Wyeth and Hopper are the most referenced American painters by American filmmakers, so I feel a bit sick mentioning Wyeth," he says. "But he captures an archetypal New

Here and right, top and bottom: 'Wickies' Thomas (Willem Dafoe) and Ephraim (Robert Pattinson) in *The Lighthouse*. Right, middle: Inspiration came from painters such as Edward Hopper.



The work of
Andrew Wyeth
was also
influential.



England-ness. There's a million photos of lighthouses that look the same as the Wyeth things. But he makes it slightly romantic, and even though this movie has all these naturalistic details, there's something storybook about it, and that's intentional."

THE DIALOGUE

"There's this 744-page book called *The Sailor's Word-Book*," says Eggers, pulling it off a shelf to discuss how he wrote such authentic dialogue. "There are many publications readily available with nautical slang." Key, though, was the work of Sarah Orne Jewett, a 19th-century New Hampshire writer, who interviewed seamen and transcribed their dialect phonetically. Later, Eggers' wife found a thesis on Jewett's work, filled with glossaries. "We were far along by that time," says Eggers, "but it made many dialogue polishes a million times better."

ALEX GODFREY

THE LIGHTHOUSE IS IN CINEMAS FROM
31 JANUARY 2020



No. 11 Eddie's back — why now?

What's behind the full-scale comeback — on both screen and stage — of legendary actor and comedian **Eddie Murphy**

IN 1983, HE was *Delirious*. In 1987, he was *Raw*. Now, in 2019, Eddie Murphy is reborn. The comedy mega-star has been AWOL for many years, ensconced in his cliffside Beverly Hills mansion and only emerging occasionally to make such humdrum films as *A Thousand Words* or *Mr Church*. It felt like the man who once inspired the nickname 'Money' had lost his appetite. Actually, no. He was just taking a break.

Right now, Murphy is in Atlanta, shooting a sequel to *Coming To America*, the 1988 comedy classic that introduced the world to the line, "The royal penis is clean, your Highness." And imminent is the release of *Dolemite Is My Name*, in which Murphy plays hustler Rudy Ray Moore, one of the star's real-life heroes, as he tries to make a no-budget blaxploitation movie. Both are passion projects: the first *Coming To America* was based on a scribble Murphy made in a notepad, angry after a painful break-up, while *Dolemite* is the tale of a comedian who just won't give up, much like Murphy himself as a young man.

"*Dolemite* is like a fire in Eddie's heart," Craig Brewer, director of both films, tells *Empire*. "He's always wanted to make this movie. *Coming 2 America* is personal, too. The first one was originally called 'The Quest'. And that's what's on all

of our chairs on set: *The Quest*. Because it's larger than *Coming To America* — it's the whole experience Eddie had, creating it. He's playing multiple roles again and having fun. But he's not just fucking around — he really prepares."

Equally tantalisingly for fans: Murphy is returning to live comedy. He's not only promised a stand-up tour, but is confirmed for a guest-host slot on *Saturday Night Live*. The latter is a huge surprise, given he last hosted *SNL* in 1984, and famously quit as cast member, saying, "I don't think the show is funny. I hate it." Whatever happens in front of the cameras, the evening of 21 December will go down in history.

It's the kind of full-blown A-list comeback that happens very rarely. And hopefully all those years off-grid will have been worthwhile. "Sometimes you need to go away and live a life," says Brewer. "Eddie is a father, now recently a grandfather. All of that, I'm sure, is going to be excellent fodder for when he gets up on that stage in front of a microphone." Whether he rocks another leather bodysuit or not, prepare yourself for the return of Money. **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

DOLEMITE IS MY NAME IS ON NETFLIX FROM
25 OCTOBER. COMING 2 AMERICA IS IN CINEMAS
FROM 18 DECEMBER 2020

Above: Just Like Eddie: the actor/comedian in various guises, including his upcoming role as Rudy Ray Moore in Netflix film *Dolemite Is My Name*.



Bad Boys For Life

Unfiltered, uncensored, uncompromising trailer reactions from team **EMPIRE**

John Nugent (News Editor): Anyone excited for this one?

Aliyah Allen (Designer): I am. I quite like *Bad Boys*. I prefer the first one, though.

James Dyer (Digital Editor-In-Chief): Yes! I'm a big *Bad Boys* fan. *Bad Boys II*, I'm less fond of.

Chris Hewitt (Re.View Editor): It's true, *Bad Boys II* is definitely not a good film. But I do remember there was a bit where a corpse had an erection. That was quite funny.

John: Well, now, people, we've got *Bad Boys For Life*. Which sounds a bit like a threat. Here we go!

Chris: At their age, getting out of a car is going to be a bit tricky. How long did it take to do this shot?

John: This opening shot is pure Michael Bay — a cool slow-motion golden hour tracking shot. And then it's subverted with some middle-aged comedy from Martin Lawrence.

James: They're a good duo. Will Smith has charisma to spare and the dynamic he had with Martin Lawrence is the heart of *Bad Boys*. That's something that got eclipsed slightly in the second one. Hopefully there's more of it here.

John: What's this stuff about "penetration"? Is this a vaguely homophobic joke?

Ben Travis (Online Staff Writer): Is the idea that now he's old, he doesn't want to use guns anymore? He wants to talk his way out of things.

John: Doesn't quite work for me.

Ben: I'm extremely ready for Good Will Smith again. He's obviously had a really good financial year with *Aladdin*.

Chris: You sound like a stockbroker!

Ben: But he still looks good with a gun.

Chris: This is one of my issues with *Gemini Man*, though. Today's Will Smith doesn't look that much older than Will Smith from 25 years ago! How can you tell the difference? He looks incredible here. Whereas Martin Lawrence has, shall we say, aged.

John: It is good to see Martin Lawrence again, though. Did you guys see *The Beach Bum*? He has a cameo in that where he plays a dolphin trainer called Captain Wack. It's incredible.

Chris: I have a lot of affection for him. Obviously, their careers have followed different trajectories, Will Smith and Martin Lawrence. You could argue that Will Smith doing this film is even, perhaps, a favour to his friend. But Martin Lawrence is very



funny in this trailer! This trailer has actually made me laugh!

James: Good to see Joey Pants [Joe Pantoliano] back again. Still playing the police captain stereotype, swigging Pepto-Bismol.

Chris: The central tension of the movie seems to be about action heroes getting older, and them trying to maintain an image of being cool, even as you slide into your fifties. Martin Lawrence is maybe embracing that a little bit more than Will Smith. Maybe it's actually trying to say something?

Jamie Inglis (Deputy Art Director): He's talking about retiring. Do you think Martin Lawrence is going to die?

John: Depends on the box office.

Chris: Genuinely thought he was going to miss that ladder for a second.

Ben: Gotta say, it looks pretty nicely shot — lots of visual flourishes, neon lights, Miami sunsets. So many of these action sequels are knocked out cheap and end up looking a bit grey and dull.

Chris: This is Jerry Bruckheimer producing again, right? This feels like the kind of old-school '90s action flick they don't make these days, or if they do, they make them badly.

John: We haven't had a "This shit just got real"-equivalent line yet. I need this shit to get realer!

Ben: "One last time"?

John: That's very *Fast & Furious*.

Aliyah: Hey, that's Vanessa Hudgens!

John: Wow. He's firing a chain gun from a motorcycle sidecar. What a final shot. I mean, come on!

Ben: It's like if Michael Bay did *Wallace & Gromit*!

James: I don't really need to see Will Smith's sex face, but sure.

Ben: This is the kind of nonsense I'm in for.

James: I am, having seen this trailer, no clearer as to what that film is actually about.

John: They're just, y'know, shooting people.

Chris: Who cares? It's the sort of movie in which the plot is totally irrelevant.

Jamie: I did expect a *Taken*-like thing — they're old and they have kidnapped teenage daughters. But there's no obvious threat. Other than *crime*.

Chris: There are some bad guys and they have done bad things. But — and we have to make this very clear — the bad guys are different from the bad *boys*.

BAD BOYS FOR LIFE IS IN CINEMAS FROM 17 JANUARY 2020



No./12 Meet a very different Queen

OLIVIA COLMAN and co-stars of *The Crown* on stepping into some very big (and sensible shoes) for Season 3

THE LAST TIME Olivia Colman played a queen, she won an Oscar. Of course, that was less an exercise in serene majesty and more one of screaming, stuffing her face with cake and getting giddy over the sight of Rachel Weisz in leather breeches (quite understandable).

So were there any similarities between playing Queen Anne in *The Favourite* and stepping into the sensible heels of Queen Elizabeth II in *The Crown*? “They were both called Queen?!” Colman hoots. “I couldn’t think of two more different people.”

With a £50 million budget per season, a trophy cabinet stuffed with awards and a vast (although undisclosed) audience, *The Crown* is the epic jewel in Netflix’s original programming. The first two series, which spanned 1947 to 1964, were triumphs of detail, period set-pieces and compelling performances that humanised inscrutable characters: the British royal family.

After her star-making year, any new Colman project would be highly anticipated, but the idea of a hit show navigating a complete cast overhaul is what makes *The Crown*’s third season so appealing. Colman, taking over the twin-sets and pearls from Claire Foy, is accompanied by Tobias Menzies, who replaces Matt Smith as Prince Philip, and Helena Bonham Carter picks up Princess Margaret’s martini glass from Vanessa Kirby. The newcomer in the core cast is Josh O’Connor as Prince Charles — although the 29-year-old is familiar from the ITV miniseries *The Durrells*, and as the star of the acclaimed British film *God’s Own Country*.



Top: There’s a new Liz in residence, and it’s Olivia Colman. **Above:** Camilla (Emerald Fennell) only has eyes for Prince Charles (Josh O’Connor).

The casting facelift, which Menzies refers to as “the strangest, most regal relay race” means that just as legacy weighs on their characters, the cast have one formidable act to follow. “Vanessa won a fucking BAFTA,” says Bonham Carter. “So there was a bit of intimidation going on. Like, how do we top [that]? We can only go down. It’s such a hit; now we’re going to come and fuck it up.”

And although Colman snatched the role once offered — “I got the call and went, ‘Yes please!’ Very uncool” — she initially despaired at how “fucking amazing” Foy was as a younger Elizabeth. “It probably would have been better for me not to have seen Seasons 1 and 2,” she says. “All I could think of was what Claire had done, because she was so brilliant. But at some point you have to let that go and do what you do.” **RACHAEL SIGEE**

THE CROWN SEASON 3 IS ON NETFLIX FROM 17 NOVEMBER

No. 13 How to rewrite Charles Dickens

SIMON BLACKWELL, co-writer of *The Personal History Of David Copperfield*, on adapting the great author's autobiographical tale

SIMON BLACKWELL HAS Charles Dickens to thank for his writing career. Years ago, as a prospective mature student, he went for an interview at university. “The guy who interviewed me was a Dickens nut,” he recalls. “I’d read some Dickens, including *David Copperfield*.” Which led to a friendly interview, which led to admission to uni, which led to a career as a writer. “*David Copperfield* has an emotional resonance for me,” adds Blackwell.

It then became the natural choice for Blackwell and his fellow Dickens buff, director Armando Iannucci, to adapt as *The Personal History Of David Copperfield*, their next project, following *The Thick Of It*, *In The Loop*, and *Veep*. But, given that Dickens is considered the greatest novelist of all time, where do you even start?

KILL DICKENS' BABIES

“It’s quite a daunting task,” laughs Blackwell of adapting the 600-odd-page book, which has dozens of

characters and seemingly endless sub-plots. “In the first few drafts you tend to follow more the shape of the book. One of the most famous quotes from the book is, ‘Barkis is willing.’ But in the end we got rid of Mr Barkis, and amalgamated him with the character of Dan Peggotty. Once we thought, ‘This is a quote people are looking out for and it’s not going to be there, this is now ours.’ We’ve got to make it function as a film.”

MAKE 'EM LAUGH

As well as Dev Patel in the title role, the film boasts the likes of Hugh Laurie, Tilda Swinton, Paul Whitehouse, Peter Capaldi and sundry other talented comic actors. Which suggests a more comedic adaptation than we’ve perhaps seen previously. “Dickens, as a comedy writer, is genuinely funny,” says Blackwell. “If something lasts that long and still makes you laugh, there’s something there. We felt other adaptations took the comedy out because it doesn’t particularly carry the story. And they would cast David as

a sappy sod. But Dickens was writing himself, so it has to have a spark and a life. And with such a great ensemble, we wanted to bring the comedy out.”

ADD YOUR OWN MATERIAL

It’s one thing rewriting Dickens. It’s another thing adding to Dickens. But that’s what Iannucci and Blackwell have done. “If you’re writing for people with the comic ability of our cast, you need to put in new stuff for



Clockwise from top: Dev Patel as David Copperfield; Armando Iannucci directs; Peer pressure from Betsey Trotwood (Tilda Swinton); Co-writer Simon Blackwell.

them to do,” says Blackwell. “Dev is a fantastic physical comedian, so we put a lot of that in. Armando has a lot of funny running in his stuff — that can be funnier than any dialogue.”

BEWARE THE PARODY

There’s a massive pitfall waiting to claim anyone who adapts Dickens, one Blackwell was all too aware of. “It’s quite easy to lapse into cod-Dickens,” he says. “You feel you need to hit the style, but not make it too written and clunky and wordy. People did speak differently 150 years ago, but [we removed] anything that feels too archaic, or flowery. When you read it, it feels very modern. We wanted to get that on screen.” CHRIS HEWITT

THE PERSONAL HISTORY OF DAVID COPPERFIELD IS IN CINEMAS IN 2020



No./14

FACE/BACK ON

FACE/OFF IS GETTING A REBOOT. BUT WHO COULD POSSIBLY FILL THE INSANE SHOES OF NICOLAS CAGE AND JOHN TRAVOLTA?



GARY OLDMAN/
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ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER/
DANNY DEVITO

The *Twins* reunion you never knew you needed. Potential highlights: DeVito's face on Arnie's huge body; Arnie delivering the line, "I can eat a peach for hours." **JOHN NUGENT**

No./15



The next phase of Shia

After blockbuster stardom and public meltdowns, Shia LaBeouf is now entering a new stage of his career: mature, emotionally intelligent and reflective

THE REVOLVING DOOR of Hollywood can move fast. A string of dud roles, a couple of reckless incidents, a redemptive new period — this could refer to a lot of high-profile actors who found fame and then became blinded by it. But the remarkable rise and fall and rise again of Shia LaBeouf shows a singular trajectory of creative catharsis and emotional maturation.

It hasn't been an easy road. Following a few golden years as a Disney Channel poster boy, LaBeouf became the face of a multi-billion-dollar franchise in the *Transformers* films. Off screen, he started to make a name for himself for other reasons: a car crash in 2008, an arrest in 2014 for disorderly conduct and criminal trespass, and another in 2017 for public drunkenness, disorderly conduct and obstruction. LaBeouf subsequently checked into rehab and was diagnosed with PTSD. Then there was the provocative performance art, as part of the artistic trio LaBeouf, Rönkkö & Turner, which included in its interdisciplinary projects a livestream of LaBeouf standing in a lift.

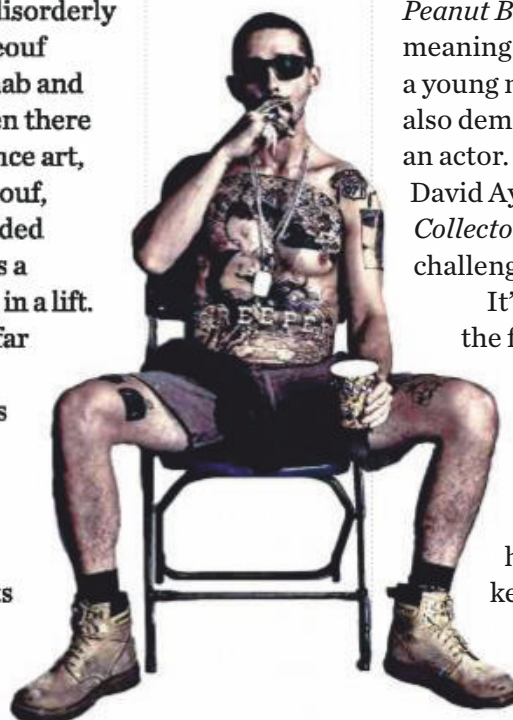
The actor has not strayed far from the spotlight. But his current and upcoming projects finally seem to offer the actor a sense of self-actualisation and serenity. His forthcoming film *Honey Boy* offers him an emotional purging, but also lets

Above: Starring in the film he wrote in rehab, *Honey Boy*. **Below:** LaBeouf gets gritty in upcoming LA street drama *The Tax Collector*.

us see an entirely different side to the actor. LaBeouf wrote the semi-autobiographical script from rehab in order to reckon with his youth as a child actor and his fraught relationship with an emotionally abusive father. (He plays his own dad in the film.) This is LaBeouf at his most gentle and introspective: showing the sensitivity of someone who experienced tumult, coming out stronger on the other side.

It's also a performance of remarkable restraint from an actor not always known for it. Projects like this let us look closer at this artist's commitment to his craft without feeling antagonised by it. His role in heartwarming Sundance hit *The Peanut Butter Falcon*, as a well-meaning fisherman who befriends a young man with Down's syndrome, also demonstrates his humility as an actor. And his upcoming role in David Ayer's crime thriller *The Tax Collector* suggests he's still open to challenging, provocative characters.

It's been quite a journey. But the fact that there are now awards whispers about his turn in *Honey Boy* is maybe the strongest indicator that we're witnessing a renaissance. Whatever happens, expect LaBeouf to keep surprising us. **ELLA KEMP**





No./16 Home Alone in the digital age

The technological advances
that the upcoming reboot
might embrace

ILLUSTRATIONS BILL MCCONKEY
WORDS OWEN WILLIAMS

THE CHRISTMAS CLASSIC *Home Alone* has been designated ripe for reinvention, getting a reboot on Disney+. But how will the Wet Bandits fare when Kevin McCallister has a state-of-the-art smart home? After consulting with experts Will Hopkins and Sam Breen of YourSmartHome.co.uk, we drew up some ideas. Alexa! Order a cheese pizza and play 'Angels With Filthy Souls'!

LIVING ROOM

ENABLE ALEXA From his bedroom hideout, Kevin instructs Alexa or Google Assistant to launch the living room TV to a deafening music channel, just as the bandits enter.

TURN IT UP The McCallisters, of course, have multi-room audio installed, so the cacophony from the ear-splitting rock channel can be broadcast throughout the house. The bandits race around in a panic.

UNLEASH THE BOTS As the bandits flap about, Kevin drives his robot vacuum cleaners under their feet to trip them up.

LIGHTS OUT Kevin instructs Alexa to turn off all the lights, then follows the progress of the bandits via motion sensors reporting to his phone screen.

KITCHEN

TURN ON THE TAPS While the bandits are in the living room, Kevin turns on the kitchen's smart taps, causing the room to flood. The bandits open the door — and are met with a tidal wave.

CAFFEINATE! CAFFEINATE! Earlier, Kevin had remotely started the coffee machine percolating.

As the now definitely Wet Bandits splash on the floor, the home control system announces through the speakers that the coffee is ready. Panicked, Marv and Harry race upstairs.

BEDROOM

GIVE 'EM A SHOCK While the criminals were downstairs, Kevin modified a smart socket to give electric shocks at the push of smartphone button. Seeing via the motion trackers that they've reached the main bedroom, Kevin buzzes the bandits as they reach to light a lamp.

REMOTE ACTION Kevin begins remotely switching on all the other bedroom lights.

Convinced that they've woken a whole houseful of people, the bandits race downstairs again.

LIGHT THE FIRE As they descend, Kevin triggers the audio system to announce that the house is on fire, and lights up an emergency exit route. The bandits follow the lights to the garden.

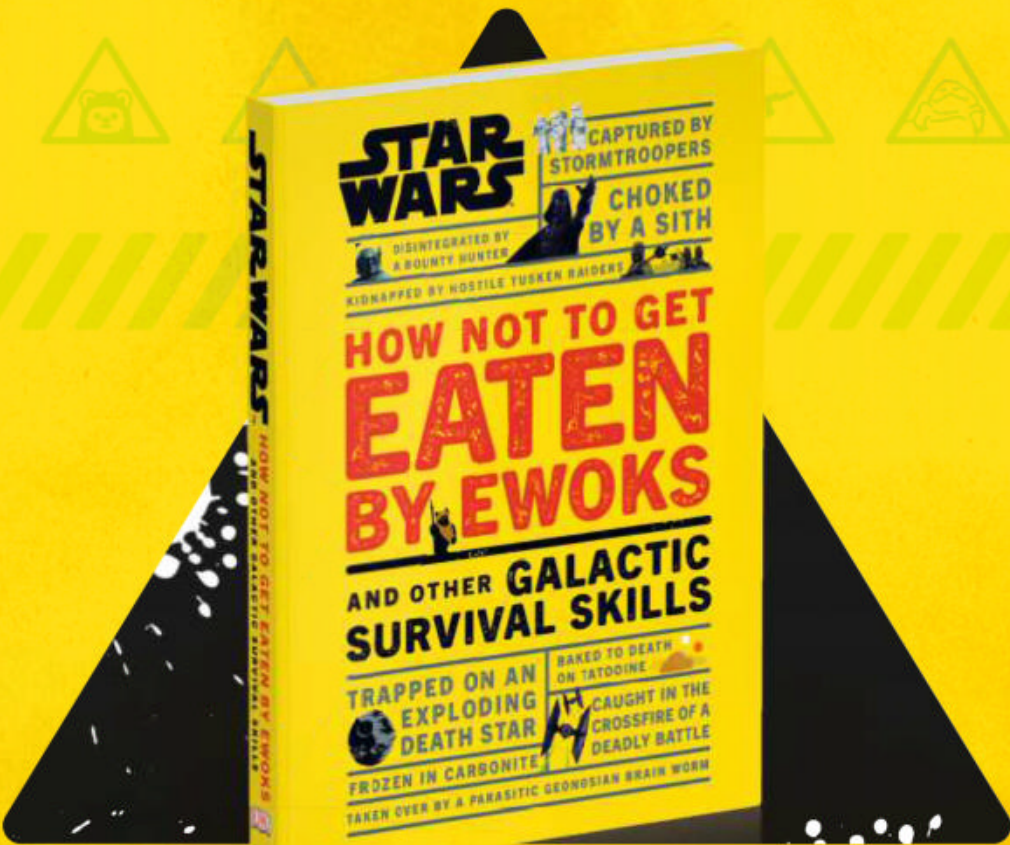
GARDEN

MAKE IT RAIN Where they find Kevin has corralled them into a topiary dead end. Kevin turns on the sprinklers to hose them, and their movement triggers the motion-sensitive irrigation system. The Wet Bandits are, well, wet again.

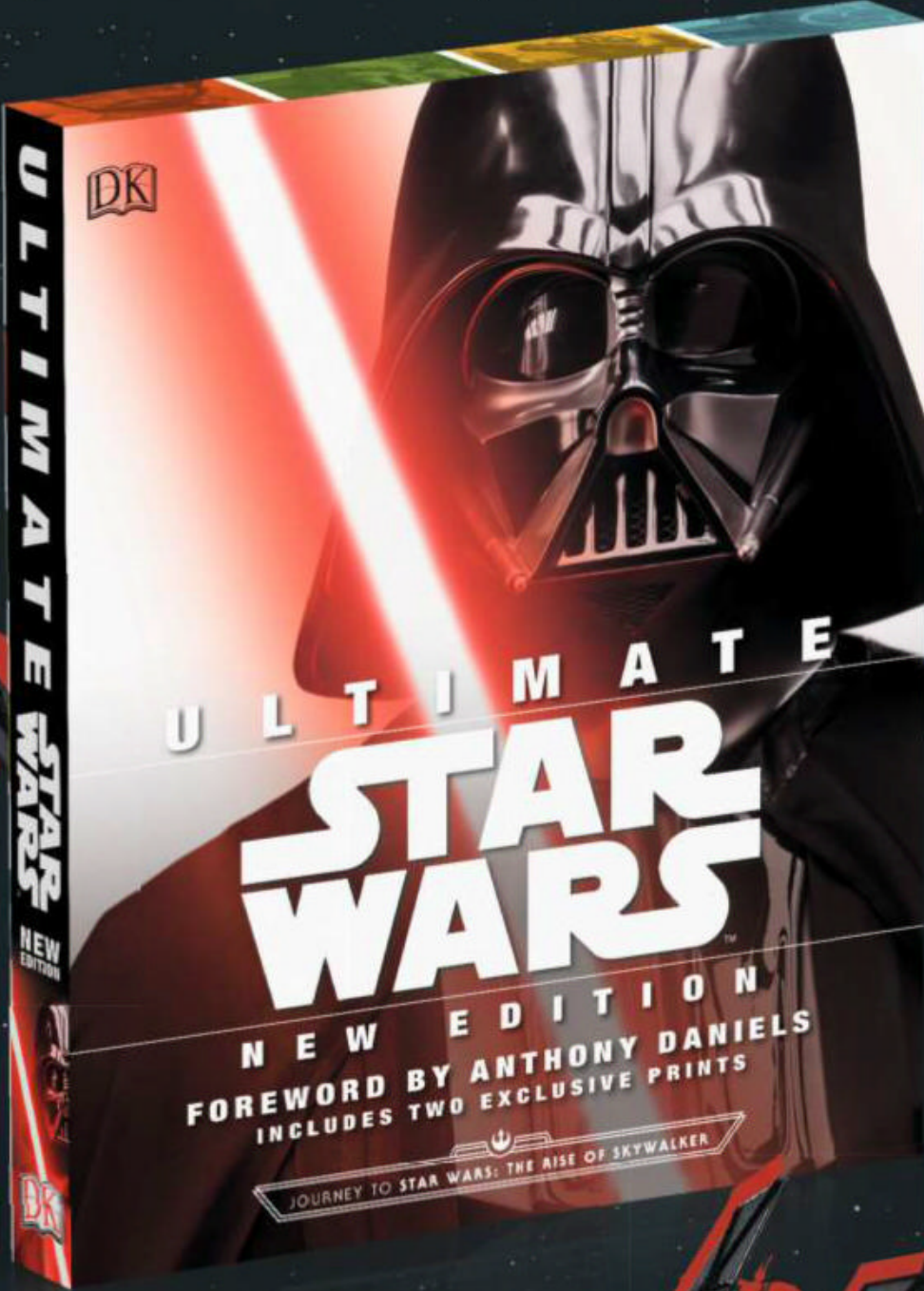
DRIVE THEM AWAY The McCallisters own a Model X Tesla equipped with Enhanced Autopilot which they've parked off the property while they're away. Whipping out his phone again, Kevin uses the 'Summon' feature to bring the driverless car to the front of the house. Seeing it pulling into the driveway, the bandits flee. Victory!



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No. 17

From the front line of Disney's first war movie

[ON-SET REPORT]

The **MULAN** remake promises military might, worlds away from the animated original. *Empire* reports from the ground



WHERE? Ahuriri Valley, New Zealand

WHEN? 29 September 2018

WHY? Disney is making an actual flesh-and-blood live-action version of its 1998 animated musical *Mulan*, and we're here to check that it's all for reals.

WHO'S IN IT? Liu Yifei, Donnie Yen, Jason Scott Lee, Jet Li, Yoson An, Gong Li, Rosalind Chao and more horses than you've ever seen in your life.

WHAT DID WE SEE? Mountains! Everywhere you look there are beautiful, imposing, snowcapped mountains — this scenery, we're told, uncannily doubles for China, where much of the film has already been shot. Above us, on a ridge, are dozens of spear-wielding Huns on horses. The bad guys. And there's not a green-screen in sight.

HOW DOES THE WISEASS DRAGON FIT INTO IT? Sorry, Eddie Murphy fans: there is no Mushu, the sassy dragon, here. "We're thinking about how David Lean or Kurosawa might approach something like this," says producer Jason Reed. As such, nobody will be breaking into song, either. We watch Liu Yifei's Mulan training for war: she spins, she ducks, and she doesn't sing a note. Blessedly.



SO THIS IS SERIOUS BUSINESS?

When the cameras are rolling. In the canteen tent we bump into Jason Scott Lee, playing the villainous warrior leader Bori Khan, less foreboding than he was on his horse earlier. But then, everyone looks less villainous in the canteen. "Bori Khan's whole intention is to get back the land and crush the people who killed his father," explains Lee, standing next to a coffee machine. Nearby, a fully armoured man sits alone, eating a banana.

ALEX GODFREY

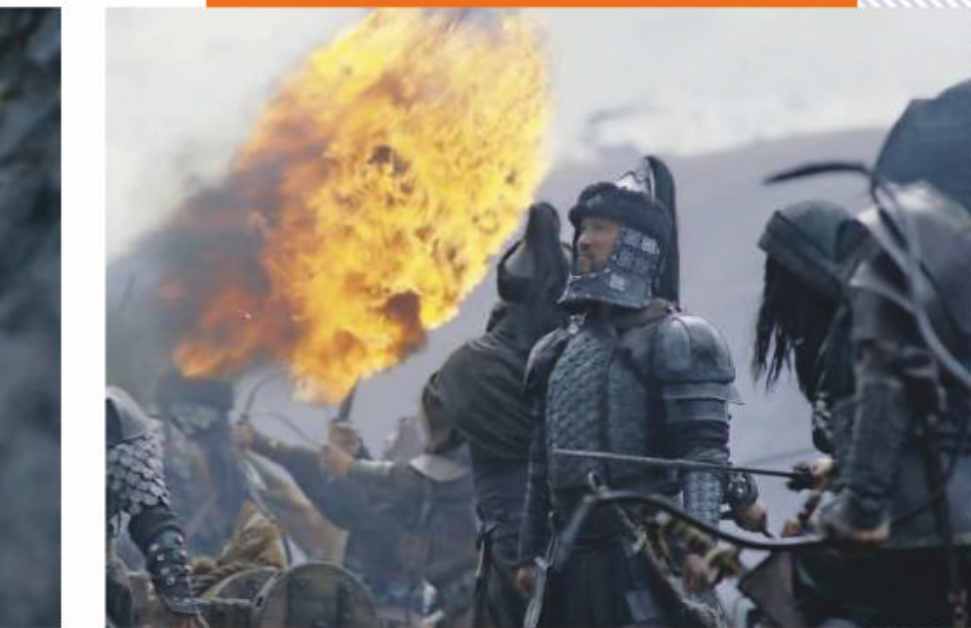
MULAN IS IN CINEMAS FROM 27 MARCH 2020



Getty Images



Clockwise from here: The Imperial Army (Liu Yifei as Mulan, disguised as a man, centre) in the *Mulan* remake; The film, an old-school action movie, involved hundreds of armoured soldiers; The training camp; Mulan, before joining the army.



No./18 Take all the time you need!

Director Richard Linklater's next film will take 20 years to complete — here's why we should all be patient

WHEN RICHARD LINKLATER'S latest film was announced, a few sceptical eyebrows were raised. The filmmaker, who famously took 12 years to make *Boyhood*, will now spend a full two decades making *Merrily We Roll Along*, an adaptation of the musical by Stephen Sondheim and George Furth, which is set across a 20-year period. Many corners of the film world carped: why bother? When there's de-ageing CGI as seen in Martin Scorsese's *The Irishman*, or make-up and prosthetics at hand... what's the point? But this surely misunderstands the artist. Watch any of Richard Linklater's films, from *Slacker* to the *Before* trilogy, and you will understand why he is not interested in CGI. This is not a filmmaker accustomed to green-screens and dots on faces. He is a student of filmmakers like Eric Rohmer and Robert Bresson, minimalist directors who emphasised realism over flashy genre stylings, and took their time with long, lingering dialogue between characters. Even in his more visually experimental films like *Waking Life* or *A Scanner Darkly*, he keeps the foundation of a kind of cinéma vérité throughout.

Boyhood allowed him to tell an enduring story with this philosophy. It was, really, the first coming-of-age film that actually showed its characters quite literally come of age. Even with the advances in technology, audiences recognise the difference.

But even beyond the superficial effect, *Merrily We Roll Along* will benefit from reality seeping into his fiction, as Linklater lets his story develop organically over the years. This kind of drip-feed filmmaking technique was the real, astonishing value of *Boyhood*, which evolved over the years, incorporating the cast and crew's lives as they went. Linklater encouraged his lead actors to participate in the writing process, bringing their experiences of the previous 12 months to the screen. That rich, authentic tapestry of life, like "timelapse photography of a human being", as Ethan Hawke put it, will be what makes *Merrily We Roll Along* so unique.

It's no mean feat, and a huge commitment — Linklater will be pushing 80 by the time he's done. But he has the patience for it. We should have some patience, too. **JOHN NUGENT**



Above: Richard Linklater — and how he might look when *Merrily We Roll Along* is finished. **Below:** Beanie Feldstein, who will play Mary in the film.



No./19

How our friendship became a film

Director Joe Talbot on how **THE LAST BLACK MAN IN SAN FRANCISCO** is an ode to his city — and his best friend

A SWEET, INTIMATE, deeply personal drama, *The Last Black Man In San Francisco* was a huge hit at this year's Sundance. First-time filmmaker Joe Talbot co-conceived it with his best friend Jimmie Fails, who stars as himself in a story partly based on his own life, and refusal to let go of his old childhood home. It's a poetic paean to roots — and, as Talbot explains, friendship infused the entire production and beyond.

HARNESSING THE EMOTION

Talbot and Fails met as teenagers, beginning a friendship that soon turned into filmmaking. “We could be more vulnerable with each other than with other friends. The first time we ever hung out, he came over to my house and we just talked late into the night. He had to call his group home [Fails lived in foster care from the age of three] to check in and let them know where he was. They didn't believe him, that he would just be [with Talbot] talking — they were like, ‘Are you out doing drugs?’”

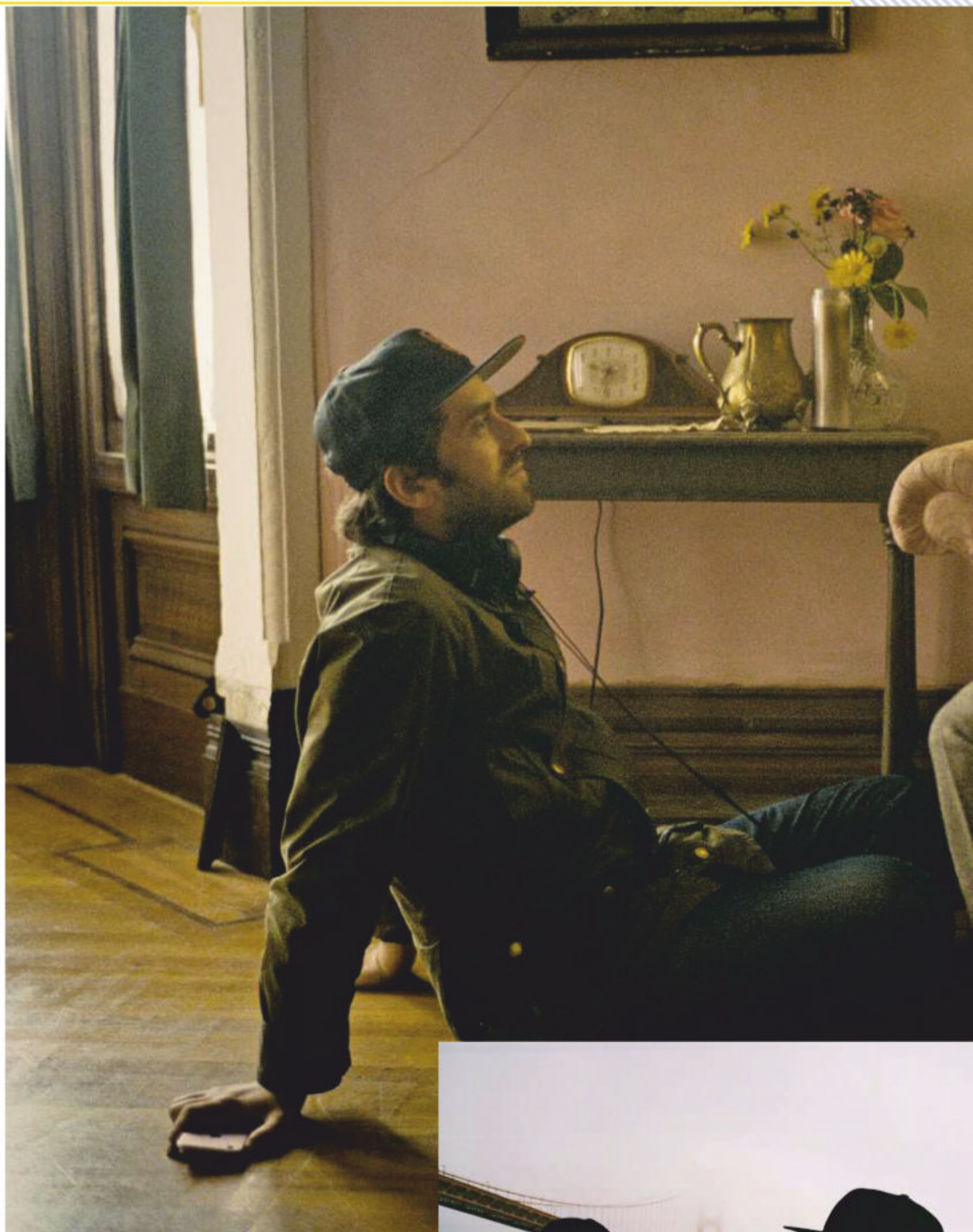
BEING BONDED BY THE CITY

In the film, Jimmie pines for the way things used to be, squatting in his old childhood home, fighting the sweeping gentrification. “We both have a kind of romantic sense of old San Francisco that we're trying to hold onto in our memories and our hearts. At first we were really angry and confused by the changes we were seeing, but over time it became more loving, partly because of the people around us making the film — they gave so much of themselves to this project, and that feeling bled into our hearts.”

VISUALISING FRIENDSHIP

In a sweet and gentle motif, Jimmie and his on-screen best friend Montgomery (Jonathan Majors) traverse the city together on a single skateboard.

“Seeing the way Jonathan puts his hands on Jimmie's shoulders to almost gently steer him as they embark on this journey across town, we



were hopeful that it could establish the unique bond that Jimmie and Jonathan had. We don't often get to see guys be comfortable, being that close on screen, and it not be suggested as more.”

ENJOYING THE RESULTS

Talbot and Fails have been hearing from people all over the world who have been touched by the on-screen friendship.

“I remember watching [Ken Russell's] *Women In Love*. That movie blew my mind, this bond and

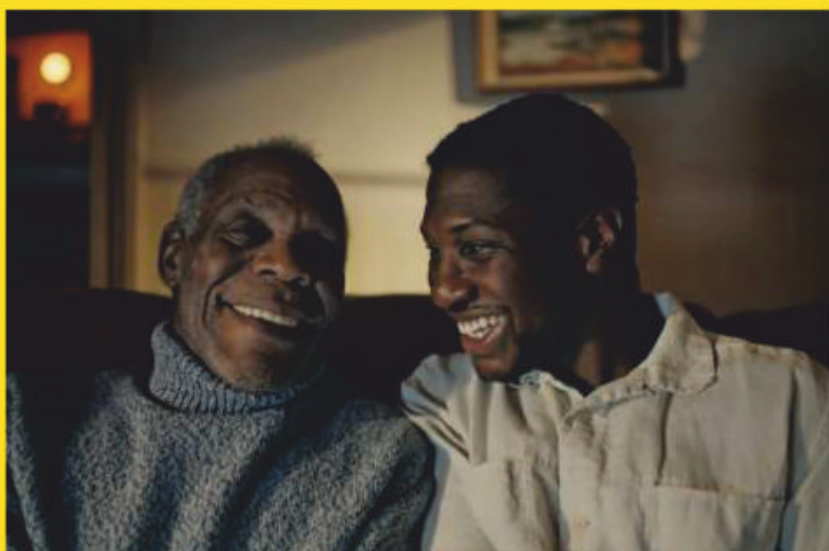
No./20

So, is he a ghost or what?

From the likely to the implausible, we sift through the internet's theories on what romcom **Last Christmas** is really all about



Left: Home comfort: director Joe Talbot with best friend, co-writer and lead actor Jimmie Fails.



closeness that I just never got to see men in my life have. Jimmie said he wished that when he was growing up there was a movie like our one, with this kind of friendship, because it would have saved him a lot of questioning and doubt — you can feel like that when you don't feel like you see things reflected on screen that are in your heart." **ALEX GODFREY**

THE LAST BLACK MAN IN SAN FRANCISCO IS IN CINEMAS FROM 25 OCTOBER

Top: Mont (Jonathan Majors) wanders a changing San Fran with Jimmie. Above: Jimmie watches TV with Grandpa Allen (Danny Glover). Above left: That's what you call a gated community.



THEORY 1

Tom (Henry Golding) is a ghost; he died and then became a heart donor to Kate (Emilia Clarke).

THE CASE FOR: It fits with a literal interpretation of the lyrics of the George Michael song 'Last Christmas', which the film was partially inspired by. And some internet sleuths have noted

that Tom doesn't seem to change his clothes in the trailer.

THE CASE AGAINST: Other, more observant internet sleuths have noted that Tom *does* actually change his clothes, and seems to interact with physical things quite a lot for a ghost.

LIKELIHOOD: 8/10



THEORY 2

Tom is actually a guardian angel, sent to ensure Kate follows her dreams.

THE CASE FOR: The poster features the tagline "It's a wonderful life", with the word "wonderful" crossed out, which suggests the film could be taking cues from the 1946 Jimmy

Stewart Christmas perennial. Could Tom be a latter-day Clarence?

THE CASE AGAINST: Henry Golding can certainly boast angelic good looks — but surely it's against heaven rules for celestial beings to cop off with a mortal?

LIKELIHOOD: 6/10



THEORY 3

Tom is an elf, sent from Lapland by Santa Claus to keep Christmas cheer.

THE CASE FOR: Well, Kate dresses as an elf in her job at a Christmas shop. Perhaps Tom is some sort of festive brand ambassador, keeping tabs on any

elf franchisees?

THE CASE AGAINST: Director Paul Feig has directly dismissed this hypothesis, telling *The Mirror*: "It's a Christmas movie. It's not *The Matrix*. I find it very amusing that they're really looking for things."

LIKELIHOOD: 1/10

LAST CHRISTMAS IS IN CINEMAS FROM 15 NOVEMBER



Movies that go bump in the night

As Sky Cinema's Halloween Collection debuts, **CHRIS HEWITT** and **HELEN O'HARA** discuss the scariest movies of all time

IT'S THAT TIME of year again. Halloween looms, and with it evil walks abroad. Well, let it walk abroad. You can stay safe and sound inside, watching one of the many great horror films on Sky Cinema's Halloween Collection. But which is the greatest? It's time to tackle the most terrifying question of them all...

Chris: So, Helen... Halloween's just around the corner, and so my thoughts are turning towards scary fillums, as we say back in Northern Ireland. And in particular, the scariest film or fillum of all

time. And as Halloween's nearly upon us, I can't ignore the claims of John Carpenter's movie that takes place on that day. So, is the original *Halloween* the scariest film of all time?

Helen: Well, I should preface by saying that for a horror fan I am a total wuss. I get scared even when I have seen a film a million times and know that it's just a cat, so readers should therefore take my assessment of a film's scariness with a pinch of salt if they are made of sterner stuff. That said, I think we can all agree, as a species, that *Halloween* is terrifying in the extreme. Scariest ever? I'm not so sure. But all those point-of-view shots that put you in the killer's shoes? The way they make you, the audience, almost complicit in his crimes? That is deeply disturbing stuff.

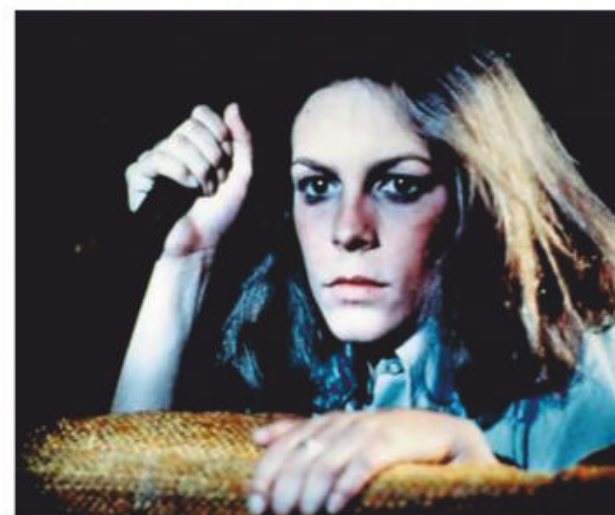
Chris: Absolutely. I enjoyed the David Gordon Green sequel/remake, but there's something about the classic composition and framing of the Carpenter movie (in conjunction with his genius cinematographer, Dean Cundey) that continues to chill the blood. It wasn't the first slasher movie, but it is widely seen as the movie that kickstarted the genre, and led to all kinds of masked maniacs. I have a soft spot for Jason Voorhees and the outlandishness of a number of the *Friday The 13th* movies, but Michael Myers remains the greatest horror movie bad guy for me. There's something

Halloween: © 1978 Falcon International Productions. The Shining © Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. The Ring TM & © DREAMWORKS LLC. All Rights Reserved / Paramount. Annabelle © 2014 Warner Bros. International, Inc. The Omen © 1976 Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation. All rights reserved.

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Clockwise from above: Shelley Duvall freaks out in *The Shining*; Naomi Watts in *The Ring*; Jamie Lee Curtis fights back in *Halloween*; A sinister toy story in *Annabelle*; Harvey Stephens is the demonic Damien in *The Omen*. **Facing page:** *Halloween's* Michael Myers (Nick Castle).



about the implacability of his particular brand of evil — he's essentially the shark from *Jaws* recast in human form. Unstoppable, unknowable, and with the blackest eyes. The devil's eyes. But you're right, I'm still not sure if I'd say that *Halloween* is the scariest film of all time. Another contender could be another Carpenter: *The Thing*.

Helen: I adore *The Thing*. It has some of the most effective gore I have ever had the misfortune to see — that cardiac arrest scene! — and that great, charismatic Kurt Russell performance. I feel like it should also get bonus points for having a bad guy that's so amorphous: while those Rob Bottin effects are incredible, there is no single defining image of the Thing — by definition! And yet this Carpenter doesn't need that iconography. Instead we have that classic horror combination of terrifying beast you can't defeat and hostile outside environment you can't survive, so that escape is impossible and the claustrophobia is overwhelming. That's a remarkably effective device: think of another contender: *The Shining*.

Chris: Ah, *The Shining*. I love that film. I admire that film. It's one of the great haunted house (or, in this case, hotel) stories. And yet, sometimes I feel it's the work of a director — Stanley Kubrick, of course — who was interested in the genre mainly from a technical perspective. So it's not quite in

the upper echelons for me. It's no *Event Horizon*. And I realise how weird that is as a sentence.

Helen: Hello, security? I need you to remove a demented madman from the building. I'm not always a huge Kubrick fangirl, but even I can see that this is a story more about the enemy within than the ghosts without, and the slow degeneration of a man into madness. You could lose all the supernatural elements and still have something terrifying, and again there's that tension where there is no escape and no safe refuge — not even behind a locked bathroom door. And okay, Stephen King didn't love it, but Steven Spielberg does (look at *Ready Player One*) so I'm sticking with this.

Chris: I'm not saying *The Shining* isn't a great horror film. It is. I'm not in the King camp here. All I'm saying is that it doesn't have an eyeless, naked Sam Neill bellowing, "DO YOU SEE?" Look, I've been on the *Event Horizon* train since it came out in 1997 and took up residence inside my head to the point where I had dreams, or nightmares if you will, about it for two weeks. I'm delighted to see that, despite being a flop at the time, it's undergoing something of a renaissance. And it ticks a lot of my horror boxes — despite being, shall we say, undecided about the whole God thing, movies with a supernatural or devilish bent hit me in the scary sweet spot, whether it's *The*

Omen or more modern fare like *Annabelle* or *The Nun*. Ain't nothing stopping a possessed doll or a demonic nun, Helen.

Helen: You're telling me: I went to a convent school. *The Nun*'s a genuinely horrifying creation, I think, even if it does turn out to be a demon rather than a real nun. That white face and shadowed eyes make her look very J-horror to me: think of Sadako in *The Ring* and all of the similarly dark, dank pretenders to its crown. The common thread is that I don't want *any* of these characters crawling out of my TV and coming after me, thanks very much. In fact I feel a sudden urge to make a cup of hot chocolate and watch something extremely comforting. I'll be over here watching *Christopher Robin* if you need me.

Chris: A man surrounded by talking stuffed animals? Forget *Halloween*, or *The Exorcist*, or my beloved *Evil Dead II* — I think *Christopher Robin* just might be the scariest film of all time.

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★★★★★ EXCELLENT

★★★★★ GOOD

★★★ OKAY

★★ POOR

★ AWFUL

[EDITED BY IAN FREER]



[FILM]

JOKER



OUT 4 OCTOBER
CERT TBC / 122 MINS

DIRECTOR Todd Phillips
CAST Joaquin Phoenix, Zazie Beetz, Robert De Niro, Frances Conroy, Marc Maron, Brett Cullen

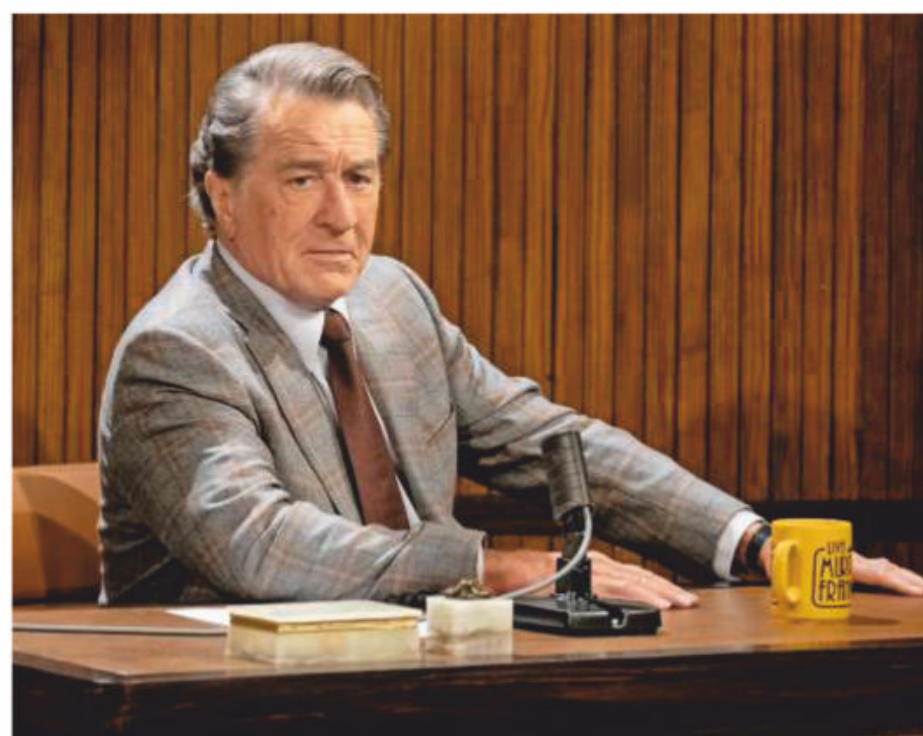
PLOT Arthur Fleck (Phoenix) is an unsuccessful clown and an even more unsuccessful stand-up comedian. As he attempts to simply exist in a broken-down and beaten-up Gotham City, a sequence of violent events will lead to a revolt across the town and the birth of the Joker.

1981 IN GOTHAM City. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. There's a garbage strike, rats rampaging in the piled-up trash, parts of the city are no better than slums and Arthur Fleck, troubled professional clown and wannabe stand-up comedian, sits in front of a mirror, slowly painting his face. He attempts to smile and resorts to holding the corners of his mouth up in a grin that stretches from ear to ear. A single tear rolls down his cheek unnoticed, pulling his make-up with it. So begins *Joker*. There's not a costume or burst of CGI in sight. Just a man. A sad clown.

Arthur is one of life's victims, one of life's "freaks". He's beaten-up, mocked, abused. He's all too familiar with the taste of blood in his mouth. But he's not just a loner or misunderstood; he can't engage with the world at all. Everyday existence is simply impossible as the rules and codes that structure a society



Clockwise from left: Joker (Joaquin Phoenix): hasn't got eyes in the back of his head; Hard times for a working clown; Robert De Niro's Pupkin-made-good chat show host Murray Franklin; Two sides to Arthur Fleck.



— even one as broken and busted as Gotham — remain unknowable to him. He stands outside of the world instead, partly due to a condition which causes uncontrollable laughter (often in the worst situations), his eyes thick with pain and sadness as another laughing fit overcomes him and the world retreats yet further.

“I just don’t want to feel so bad anymore,” whispers Arthur, who’s also on seven different types of medication and has been in the system for most of his life. A system that now has no resources or time for him. A desperate whisper that you know won’t be heard by anyone. That simply signifies the beginning of both a descent and his path to becoming the Joker. This is ultimately what *Joker* is: an origin story. One that touches only ever so lightly on what has come before in the DC Universe.

This could, particularly in the current climate, be viewed as a lament for outsiders >





and the ignored. That's too simple and *Joker* does anything but deliver you easy answers. It's a sad, chaotic, slow-burn study of someone who isn't visible; who doesn't even exist to the world around them. But your empathy, sympathy even, isn't guaranteed, and it begins to dissolve as Arthur somehow moves even further to the edges. This is, we mustn't forget, the story of how a *villain* was made. But what writer/director Todd Phillips and co-writer Scott Silver (*8 Mile*, *The Fighter*) have written into life is the Joker as a *character*. What they and the film is interested in is the mental, moral, emotional, physical make-up of the man who became the Joker.

As Arthur/Joker, Joaquin Phoenix is astonishing. Phillips has said he had a picture of the actor above his screen when writing the script and it's a belief that has paid off. Phoenix inhabits Arthur: having lost weight for the role, he looks thin, frail, hungry. Shadows carve out his exposed bones. His physicality is precise — the way he moves, shuffles, runs, sits, smokes, shrinks. His usual intensity is on full display and it's captivating, even overwhelming in moments. Comparing him to Heath Ledger and Jack Nicholson feels like a nonsense: this is a Joker we've never seen — in many respects it isn't *the* Joker, it's Arthur.

This is a deliberate consequence of stepping away from the source material. Phillips has said that though elements were drawn from 1988 graphic novel *The Killing Joke* (in which the Joker is an unsuccessful stand-up), the film doesn't follow the comic books. A bold move for a universe with such an ardent fan base, but it's the film's greatest asset. Not only does it, and the character, sit completely apart from the rest of the DC Cinematic Universe, but it stands apart from comic book movies entirely (even *The Dark Knight*, as grounded as it was). It's a character and a movie that's liberated, entirely. Free to be whatever and whomever it choose.

While this is Phoenix's film, Frances Conroy is quietly devastating as Arthur's mother Penny,



Top: Broken being Fleck tends to mother Penny (Frances Conroy). **Above:** Zazie Beetz as approachable neighbour Sophie.

and Zazie Beetz, as neighbour Sophie Dumond, while arguably underused, brings vital humanity to her scenes with Arthur. The most talked-about piece of casting was obviously Robert De Niro as late-night TV host Murray Franklin. Phillips has made no secret of his love for *The King Of Comedy* and it's a sprinkle of magic to see Rupert Pupkin become Franklin.

Mention must be made of *Joker*'s cello score by Hildur Guðnadóttir — mournful, dark and fractured — and the cinematography by Lawrence Sher. In his hands, Gotham is alive as a flawed, brutal, broken-hearted character in its own right. Oppressive and oppressed, with a glimmer of light that never truly gets in. It throbs at the very heart of the film, waiting for what is destined to come. And the two things entwine perfectly as Arthur dances between the light and the shadows, each bone visible and sharp as the strings swell and scratch. **TERRI WHITE**

VERDICT Bold, devastating and utterly beautiful, Todd Phillips and Joaquin Phoenix have not just reimagined one of the most iconic villains in cinema history, but reimagined the comic book movie itself.



FARMING

★★

11 OCTOBER / CERT 18 / 102 MINS

DIRECTOR Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje

CAST Damson Idris, Kate Beckinsale, John Dagleish

Actor Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje turns his traumatic early life into a gut-wrenching directorial debut in *Farming*, which sees Enitan (Idris, superb) — a young Nigerian boy who is 'farmed out' by his parents to a white British family — fall in with a white skinhead gang. Eni's complete rejection of his blackness makes for authentic but relentlessly bleak viewing, and there's not enough character development to offset the bouts of physical and psychological torture. Beckinsale (Eni's foster mother) and Mbatha-Raw (Eni's kind teacher) can only do so much with characters desperately in need of more screen time, and while the film touches on the rotten system that forms its title, there's precious little by way of actual insights. **AW**



THE LAUNDROMAT

★★★

OUT NOW (CINEMAS); 18 OCTOBER (NETFLIX)

CERT TBC / 96 MINS

DIRECTOR Steven Soderbergh

CAST Gary Oldman, Antonio Banderas, Meryl Streep

For a former retiree, Steven Soderbergh hasn't mellowed: with this, his unravelling of 2016's Panama Papers leak, he's mad as hell. That leak pulled back the curtain on corruption affecting all of us, and Soderbergh does the same here, ripping down artifice as Oldman and Banderas, as real-life law firm assholes Jürgen Mossack and Ramón Fonesca, unpick their methods direct to camera, ram-raiding the fourth wall. The film flips between such self-indulgence and episodic narrative, and there are great turns — notably Nonso Anozie's billionaire bedswerver — but the disconnect doesn't make for such rewarding drama. Still, it's a righteous call to arms with charm to spare. **AG**

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*WHILST STOCKS LAST



Ramona (Jennifer Lopez) and Destiny (Wu) make a formidable double act. **Above:** Knee dancing is all the rage, y'know. **Below:** Keke Palmer's Mercedes bends. As does Lili Reinhart's Annabelle.

[FILM]

HUSTLERS



OUT NOW
CERT 15 / 110 MINS

DIRECTOR Lorene Scafaria

CAST Constance Wu, Jennifer Lopez, Julia Stiles, Keke Palmer, Lily Reinhart, Lizzo, Cardi B

PLOT Struggling to make ends meet, inexperienced New York stripper Destiny (Wu) strikes up a friendship and profitable partnership with star dancer Ramona (Lopez). When the recession hits, however, the pair concoct a decidedly more dangerous way to earn their money back at the expense of their clients.

WHETHER YOU'RE A fan of her films or not, it's undeniable that no-one commands a room quite like Jennifer Lopez. That self-made magnetism that has been finessed over years of performing still has the ability to seemingly slow down time, and writer-director Lorene Scafaria appreciates this more than anyone, rewarding such enigmatic energy with the role of a lifetime.

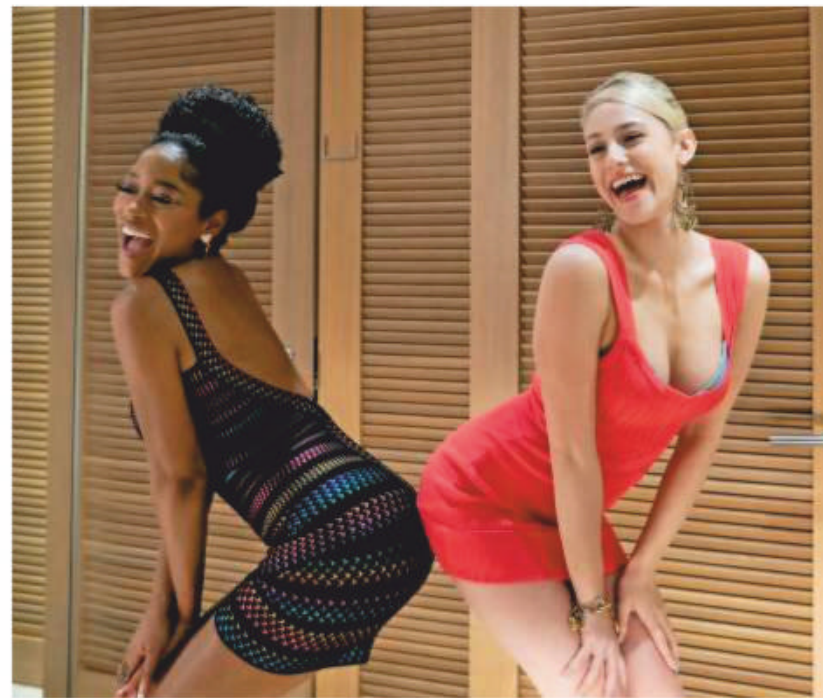
Make no mistake that *Crazy Rich Asians* heroine Constance Wu gets top billing for *Hustlers* — a con movie with all the slickness of a Steven Soderbergh thriller — and rightfully so as

its strong-willed protagonist. Yet from the moment Ramona straddles her pole under a waterfall of paper bills, it's Lopez whose legacy is cemented.

It's a display of dedicated athleticism (Scafaria acknowledges the male gaze but smartly pushes it to the periphery of the film) that's rewarded with the kind of applause reserved for the highest note of the opera, with a sea of admiration washing the stage after the final pose has been thrown. It is unquestionable that Ramona rules this power dynamic.

"Doesn't money make you horny?" she coos afterwards to a stunned Destiny (Wu), cradling her earnings like a newborn. For the women working at Moves strip club, money is a shortcut to freedom at the expense of a society designed to hold them down. Their well-crafted physiques are a mere extension of the methods that they use to manipulate wealthy, ruthless men who have been stealing from the less fortunate for years. This is a point that Ramona is keen to stress as a means of smoothing over the moral cracks of their story (and win over the viewer in doing so). "It's a business, and it's more honest than any transaction they did that day," she says via voiceover, as a top-tier Wall Street type drops note onto quivering note while the girls writhe and dip in his sweaty company.

In the *New York* magazine article that inspired *Hustlers*, journalist Jessica Pressler frames the women in a Robin Hood context, drugging and robbing Wall Street one creep at a time to afford a better life for themselves and their families at a time of financial disarray.



This modern band of merry men each has their own calling card, be it Cardi B's signature cackle or Lizzo's white, pillowy pimp hat. Even *Riverdale*'s Lili Reinhart — who takes the hit as the quiet one so the bigger characters can thrive — turns in one of the best vomit scenes of the year.

As Pressler surrogate Elizabeth, Julia Stiles displays the art of excellent listening, with limited screen time but a knack for capturing exactly what we're thinking with a fleeting, nuanced expression. And then, serving as both the moral backbone and beating heart of this heady ensemble, Wu flattens all expectations at every turn. Stripped of the gaudy characteristics



of her cohort, she instead channels raw vulnerability into Destiny's troubled trajectory, but pairs it with a sharp entrepreneurial streak. This is not someone to be underestimated.

Their collective moxie is thrilling, and stoked by Ramona's prowess allows them to run circles around their clientele, a rare, somewhat rewarding sight to behold until the moral scale is upended and the group's dynamic rapidly unravels. When it does, Scafaria blends the perfect tone — belly-laugh funny at times, tentatively mindful at others. "I don't feel sorry for these men," Elizabeth says as a hopeful means of reassuring Destiny during their interview. "I feel sorry for these men," is Destiny's measured reply.

As if the weighty list of accolades stated here aren't enough, *Hustlers* is also pleasingly aesthetically assured. It switches from travelling, *Birdman*-like takes to crisp, fast cuts, all captured with a nocturnal neon tinge by cinematographer Todd Banhazl (who worked magic on Janelle Monáe's visual album *Dirty Computer*) and edited pacily by Kayla Emter to keep up with Lopez's lightning-quick delivery.

Where Scafaria finds her strongest footing in a genre defined by the cutthroat dialogue of Soderbergh or even Scorsese, is in the welcome camaraderie conjured up between the film's big narrative punches. There's a joyful rhythm to the girls squabbling over chicken wings, or giggling through a drug-cooking montage that would make Walter White blush. It's these moments that artfully capture a lucrative partnership that has evolved authentically into a priceless friendship.

In giving her heist movie a heart without sacrificing the high-tension tropes of the genre, Scafaria chooses to celebrate what makes women different over dwelling on what holds them back. It's the women in this film that summon its sparky, scrappy edge, who implore you to stick with them through the murkiest of times. And you'll find yourself doing just that, time and time again. **BETH WEBB**

VERDICT A giddily entertaining homage to female power that illuminates bold ambition in its stars and director alike, *Hustlers* is the kind of era-defining film that Hollywood didn't know it needed.



Well, what else to do when they've not provided a chair?

ON SCREEN

[FILM]

THE DAY SHALL COME

★★★★

OUT 11 OCTOBER
CERT 15 / 88 MINS

DIRECTOR Chris Morris

CAST Marchánt Davis, Danielle Brooks, Anna Kendrick, Denis O'Hare, Kayvan Novak

PLOT Preacher and wannabe revolutionary Moses (Davis) promises to lead a small band of men in a race war while at the same time struggling to support his wife and children. When cash for a manufactured terrorism plot comes his way, mild-mannered Moses finds himself caught in a tense homeland security sting.

SATIRIST CHRIS MORRIS' second film has been a decade in waiting, after the award-winning, incendiary *Four Lions*. And it's a film that was made almost entirely in silence, with very little known until its premiere at SXSW earlier this year. Morris, as you'd expect, would like *The Day Shall Come* to speak for itself. And the first thing you learn as it opens is that it's "based on a hundred true stories", a hundred true stories gleaned over months of research that apparently prove that truth is stranger and more surreal than any fiction Morris could ever craft.

Miami-based amateur anti-violence preacher Moses Al Shabaz (Davis) is the leader of an eccentric local army made up of less than one fistful of followers. He also suffers from unspecified mental health issues that result in hallucinations and paranoia, including the belief that he can summon dinosaurs.

He and his followers may be harmless — with the much talked-about race war being

more like a bumbled battle preamble on horseback in improvised costumes — but they're no match for an FBI thirsty for "the next 9/11" at any and all cost. "Next thing you know, the Statue of Liberty's wearing a burqa and we've beheaded Bruce Springsteen," says FBI boss Andy Mudd (O'Hare), in a scene you hope is grossly exaggerated fiction but fear really, really isn't. Anna Kendrick is on biting, hilarious form as Kendra Glack, the ambitious young FBI agent who doesn't so much see an opportunity to nail a terrorist before they commit a dangerous crime as the chance to advance her career with a major sting under her belt.

Most compelling — staggeringly so, for a first-time lead film role — is Davis as Moses, who is simultaneously frustrating and charming and has a natural warmth that grounds the story, even as Morris and co-writer Jesse Armstrong send it off in increasingly fantastical and farcical directions. He's more than ably aided by Danielle Brooks as wife Venus, who first attempts to save her husband and then herself as she realises his latest madcap scheme is spinning out of control.

Though parts are dense, compounded by a zippy runtime, the film is never allowed to become heavy-handed or didactic in the truths it dispenses, even when those truths get right to the heart of the structural injustice and racism that underpins American society. For ultimately, the truth as laid out by the film's sobering finale is devastatingly simple and real: that the absurdity, not just of homeland security, but of the entire current political landscape, is far outweighed by the human cost paid over and over as a consequence.

TERRI WHITE

VERDICT A hilarious, unexpectedly heartbreaking farce that proves that Chris Morris is still a hugely important voice in telling the stories that we find hardest to hear.



Judy shouting hallelujah and getting happy.

[FILM]

JUDY

★★★★

OUT 4 OCTOBER
CERT 12A / 118 MINS

DIRECTOR Rupert Goold

CAST Renée Zellweger, Jessie Buckley, Rufus Sewell

PLOT 1968. With her ex-husband Sid Luft (Sewell) demanding custody of her children and struggling to pay a \$4 million tax bill, fragile Hollywood legend Judy Garland (Zellweger) takes up a sold-out residency at London's Talk Of The Town nightclub. Can she keep it together so the show can go on?

THERE IS AN image halfway through *Judy* that captures Judy Garland (Zellweger) slumped in her dressing room, head bowed, cigarette burning in hand, surrounded by wall-to-wall flowers, a depleted Garland before literal garlands. It's a moment that gets to the heart of the last days of Garland's life, the difference between the private and the public, despair and sadness crystallised against a rose-coloured world-view. It's something Rupert Goold's film doesn't quite manage again. For, despite an imposing performance by Renée Zellweger, *Judy* never exposes the dark heart of Garland's last years, creating an enjoyable backstage drama movie while failing to get under its protagonist's skin.

Like last year's much better *Stan & Ollie*, Tom Edge's screenplay examines Garland through the prism of a late-in-life UK engagement peppered with flashbacks to key moments in her early years as a child star. After a talk-y start in Los Angeles (Gemma-Leah Devereux is a dead spit for Liza Minnelli), things pick up when Garland arrives in London, refuses to rehearse, then knocks 'By Myself' out of the park. Garland is paired with an

assistant-cum-minder, Ros (Jessie Buckley, using a fraction of her talents), and the subsequent uphill struggle to get Garland stage-ready is entertaining. We see glimpses of other areas of Garland's life — a brutal TV interview about her children, her lover Mickey Deans (Finn Wittrock) surprising her in London — but it's in the theatre where *Judy* impresses most.

The film is less surefooted when it comes to dealing with Garland's past. Interspersed in the '60s timeline are flashbacks to young Judy in '30s Hollywood, being ugly-shamed on the set of *The Wizard Of Oz* by Louis B. Mayer and denied a French fry at lunch with Mickey Rooney to control her weight. Yet the correlation between Judy's brutal management by Mayer and her later-in-life troubles feels simplistic — a psychoanalysis 101 that undercuts any attempts at complexity. Equally banal is a plot thread back in London involving Garland and two gay fans (Andy Nyman, Daniel Cerqueira) that feels entirely engineered to pay homage to Garland's status as a gay icon rather than offer any sense of convincing organic drama.

It's a small film that never successfully evokes the scale of old-school Hollywood or the louche London of the '60s. Zellweger goes some way to etching Judy's loss — there's a touching late-on moment when Judy phones home to daughter Lorna (Bella Ramsey) — and goes for broke on stage, barnstorming her way through 'The Trolley Song' or smouldering on 'Come Rain Or Come Shine'. Yet the film really stumbles in its big climax, pulling a cheap trick, parlaying one of Hollywood's saddest, most tragic stories into a feel-good moment. Garland — and Zellweger — deserved so much more. **IAN FREER**

VERDICT *Judy is an enjoyable, sincere attempt at a multi-faceted portrait of a Hollywood legend, bolstered by a strong Renée Zellweger. Yet it never really finds the depths to make it compelling and the 'inspirational' ending diminishes a sad, complex life.*



BY THE GRACE OF GOD

★★★★

OUT 25 OCTOBER / CERT 15 / 138 MINS

DIRECTOR François Ozon

CAST Melvil Poupard, Denis Ménochet, Swann Arlaud

Perhaps best known for Hitchcockian thrillers, François Ozon's gripping dramatisation of a real-life case of child sex abuse in the French Catholic Church is the filmmaker in a more sober register. *By The Grace Of God* follows three men — Alexandre (Poupard), François (Ménochet, terrific) Emmanuel (Arlaud) — who expose the priest (Bernard Verley) who assaulted them as boys. The film's relay-race structure sees each character pass the baton to the next, the stories highlighting but not judging a different response. It has tasteful flashbacks to camping trips but Ozon's film lives in the present, a fast-paced, beautifully played film that matches *Spotlight* as a searing portrait of modern heroes who stood up. **IF**



DOWNTON ABBEY

★★★★

OUT NOW / CERT PG / 122 MINS

DIRECTOR Michael Engler

CAST Maggie Smith, Hugh Bonneville, Elizabeth McGovern, Jim Carter

If you already love Julian Fellowes' drama, its big-screen debut will delight. All your favourite characters return, and Maggie Smith's Violet continues to shower us in delightfully acerbic snark as Downton's inhabitants and staff prepare for a royal visit. But this is otherwise a nostalgia trip. Major plot points turn on how shiny the silver should be, and the big storytelling crescendo involves a minor breach of protocol. This is a stratified England as Americans see it, a Tory vision of the UK — though it would be unfair to blame the basically decent characters for that, or the talented cast. And this series of almost unrelated and often unimportant vignettes has considerable charm, helped rather than hindered by the low stakes. **HOH**



Mont (Jonathan Majors) and Jimmie (Jimmie Fails), best friends facing local upheaval.

[FILM]

THE LAST BLACK MAN IN SAN FRANCISCO



OUT 25 OCTOBER
CERT TBC / 121 MINS

DIRECTOR Joe Talbot

CAST Jimmie Fails, Jonathan Majors, Rob Morgan

PLOT Jimmie (Fails) fantasises about reclaiming the home his grandfather built in the heart of San Francisco, lost by his estranged father over a decade ago. He and his best friend Mont (Majors) try and figure out a way to get the house back while navigating a rapidly changing city.

THE DEBUT FILM from director Joe Talbot, *The Last Black Man In San Francisco* is both the story of a city and one of two friends, caught between wanting to escape the town and wanting to reclaim it. Starring and co-written by — as well as based on the life of — his childhood friend Jimmie Fails, it's an extremely personal work loaded with meaning. Jimmie (Fails) and his best friend Mont (Majors) share a brotherly love, appearing as equals and

opposites. The two leads bring a marvellous odd couple chemistry to the pair; Jimmie is an impassioned, outgoing skater, while Mont is a more observational type, watching and sketching the people around him while working on a play about the town.

Jimmie has made a habit of returning to his former family home, built by his grandfather in the 1940s — repeatedly repairing and repainting the window sills and tending the garden, against the will of the current owners. From here the film slowly unfurls Jimmie's life, exploring his connection to the area and its people with patience, while developing his bond with Mont into something more fierce and moving than first suggested.

Talbot follows a recent trend of films tackling the effects of gentrification of the Bay Area, particularly through the lens of racial politics, such as Carlos López Estrada's *Blindspotting*. A common theme between these two films is the exploration of conflicts of masculinity that come with the desire to fight against it. Here this is explored through interludes with a group of men often found on Mont's doorstep, developing into a sub-plot centred around the consequences of toxic masculinity, which eventually feeds into the main story, albeit awkwardly.

Talbot and Fails are mostly concerned with family ties, and the brief histories of the Bay Area being wiped away time and again.

There are allusions to the history of the area as somewhere that used to be a community full of Japanese-Americans before the scourge of post-war internment camps, and now its black populace is being priced out by gentrification, here described as “the final frontier of manifest destiny”. The very phrase contextualises the city's rapid reconstruction as something violent, selfish and narcissistic.

The Last Black Man In San Francisco is not an angry film, however; if anything, it's extremely warm — and if love is attention, as said in *Lady Bird*, then there's a lot of love in Adam Newport-Berra's handsome, almost painterly camerawork alone. It takes care in showing even the smallest marks on the constantly fogged-up windows, the dust falling from the ceiling with each note of the organ playing, the way natural light lands in certain corners of the house. Emile Mosseri's swooning and beautiful soundtrack matches the lovingly accomplished cinematography, creating an atmosphere that's both welcoming, and mournful for the slow death of a community.

KAMBOLE CAMPBELL

VERDICT Half mood-piece, half character study, *The Last Black Man In San Francisco* is a deeply moving lament on the effect of gentrification on the people on the Bay Area's margins.



THE GOLDFINCH

★★

OUT NOW / CERT 15 / 149 MINS

DIRECTOR John Crowley

CAST Ansel Elgort, Oakes Fegley, Nicole Kidman, Finn Wolfhard, Sarah Paulson, Jeffrey Wright

Donna Tartt's emu-sized, hyper-acclaimed book drills deep into the inner life of Theo, a young man who loses his mother and illicitly gains a famous painting in an art-gallery bombing. This adaptation struggles mightily to translate that to the screen. Both as teenager (Fegley) and twentysomething (Elgort), Theo is a blank canvas and a deathly bore. The other characters aren't much livelier, constantly monologuing at the poor guy and speaking in such ponderous tones, it's as if they know they're uttering Pulitzer-winning words. Dreary and over-reverential, the endeavour is hardly saved when it slips, ludicrously, into thriller mode at the end, with Theo going up against underworld goons. You might have more fun watching a pigeon for 149 minutes. **NDS**



TALES FROM THE LODGE

★★

OUT 25 OCTOBER / CERT 15 / 93 MINS

DIRECTOR Abigail Blackmore

CAST Laura Fraser, Mackenzie Crook, Johnny Vegas, Kelly Wenham

It is a brave soul who reunites the stars of 2004's *Sex Lives Of The Potato Men*, still justifiably derided as one of the worst films ever made. But writer/director Abigail Blackmore brings Mackenzie Crook and Johnny Vegas back together for her kinda-portmanteau horror comedy, in which the pair join a group of life-battered Gen Xers who gather at a remote country cottage to spread the ashes of a dead pal and share spooky stories. Despite a cute gimmick whereby each of the character's stories is directed by the actor narrating it, it just doesn't snap together, suffering tonal lurches, flat (and, in one case, flatulent) jokes and huge lapses of logic. Better than *Potato Men*, then, but not by much. **DJ**



NON-FICTION

★★★★

OUT 18 OCTOBER / CERT 15 / 107 MINS

DIRECTOR Olivier Assayas

CAST Guillaume Canet, Juliette Binoche, Vincent Macaigne

Following *Clouds Of Sils Maria* and *Personal Shopper*, Olivier Assayas continues his stellar run with a brisk, funny, tender look at complicated lives. The loose plot follows novelist Léonard Spiegel (Macaigne), who writes an incendiary novel blurring the lines of fact and fiction, and the subsequent aftershocks for editor Alain (Canet), girlfriend Valérie (Nora Hamzawi) and lover Selena (Binoche), who also happens to be Alain's wife. But really Assayas uses the farcical shenanigans as a framework to examine everything from debates around analogue vs digital publishing models to whether it is more acceptable to have a blowjob watching *The Force Awakens* or Haneke's *The White Ribbon*. All modern life is here — the good, the bad, the insufferable — and it's glorious. **IF**



MYSTIFY: MICHAEL HUTCHENCE

★★★★

OUT 18 OCTOBER / CERT 15 / 102 MINS

DIRECTOR Richard Lowenstein

CAST Michael Hutchence, Kylie Minogue, Helena Christensen

Richard Lowenstein's absorbing documentary on INXS frontman Michael Hutchence was ten years in the making, and what a labour of love it is. Not just Lowenstein's for his subject — he made close to 20 promo videos with the band — but also the singer's precarious love for life, and his friends', family's and lovers' abiding fierce affection for him. Piecing together his life via home-video footage and candid reminiscences from ex-girlfriends (Kylie Minogue, Helena Christensen), bandmates and relatives, it's a bittersweet, melancholy, often dreamlike eulogy — punctuated by the revelation of a catastrophic incident that forever changed his outlook. While not solving the complex riddle of the man, it nonetheless fleshes him out into a relatable, flawed but deeply engaging character. **LB**



ABOMINABLE

★★★

OUT 11 OCTOBER / CERT U / 97 MINS

DIRECTORS Jill Culton, Todd Wilderman

CAST (voices) Chloe Bennet, Albert Tsai, Eddie Izzard, Sarah Paulson, Tenzing Norgay Trainor

Some mythical creatures have better agents than others — the bunyip, the Australian legend said to resemble a cross between a bear and a duck, has yet to inspire a single movie, while the yeti gets two animated features in the space of a year. Following *Smallfoot*, this less starrily voice-casted endeavour from DreamWorks sees one of the big furry guys on a trek to get home to the Himalayas, aided by three children. It's fairly standard stronger-together, be-kind-to-nature stuff, but charming all the same. The monster is adorable (he has the look of a Wampa, the roar of Chewbacca and the disposition of BB-8), the action sequences are smartly conceived, and it scores bonus points for recreating a shot from *Indiana Jones And The Last Crusade*. **NS**



RAMBO: LAST BLOOD

★★

OUT NOW / CERT 18 / 89 MINS

DIRECTOR Adrian Grunberg

CAST Sylvester Stallone, Paz Vega, Óscar Jaenada, Yvette Monreal

An end credits montage of old *Rambo* movies is a sad reminder of how far Sylvester Stallone's secondary franchise (after *Rocky*) has devolved. After a slow *Logan*-y start with Rambo in a rocking chair, *Last Blood* sees the aged Vietnam vet head to Mexico to rescue his niece (Monreal) from sex traffickers, only to fall on the wrong side of nefarious brothers named Victor and Hugo (one for the *Les Misérables* fans). What follows is risible speechifying, wild plot conveniences, xenophobia, Stallone sleepwalking and an unpleasant second act as Rambo goes full Travis Bickle in a brothel. There's throwback fun to be had as Rambo lures the goons back to his booby-trapped farmhouse but it all feels a world away from *First Blood*. **IF**



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Little girl lost: Sienna Miller's Deb awaits news of her missing daughter.

[FILM]

AMERICAN WOMAN

★★★★

OUT 11 OCTOBER
CERT 15 / 109 MINS

DIRECTOR Jake Scott

CAST Sienna Miller, Christina Hendricks, Aaron Paul, Sky Ferreira

PLOT Living in a blue-collar town in Philadelphia, single grandmother Deb Callahan (Miller) sees her life collapse when her teenage daughter Bridget (Ferreira) goes missing. Raising her grandson, she negotiates bad men, limited job opportunities and tensions with sister Kath (Hendricks) while she waits for news of her AWOL daughter.

APT FOR A film about a woman coming into her own, *American Woman* feels a bit like a graduation party for Sienna Miller. After owning big roles in little films (*Factory Girl*, *The Edge Of Love*) and shining in supporting parts in big movies (*American Sniper*, *Foxcatcher*), Jake Scott's drama-cum-character study gives her the chance to show both her breadth and depth as a performer. And she grabs it with both hands.

American Woman tests Miller's acting chops not only by challenging her to play a woman deeply rooted in rural America but also trace a character over ten years of ups and mostly downs. Miller's Deb Callahan starts the movie as a spicy thirtysomething single mum, running with a married man, working in a supermarket, warbling Mr. Mister's 'Kyrie' in the kitchen and arguing about her life choices with her sister Kath (Hendricks), who lives across the street. Her world falls apart when her daughter Bridget (Ferreira) doesn't return after a night out, but save some brief staple scenes from any missing person's drama (locals forming search parties,

emotional TV appearances, drunk driving), Brad Ingelsby's script moves on pretty quickly to capture Deb putting her life back together, with boyfriends (Pat Healy's abusive Ray, Aaron Paul's charming Chris) and new jobs (she trains to be an accountant), all the while raising her grandson in the shadow of Bridget's absence.

At its best *American Woman* shares the shaggy-dog quality of the new Hollywood cinema of the '70s. There's something of *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* in the ease and rapport between Deb and Kath and the grass roots feminism where Deb comes to realise there is more strength and sustenance to be found in feminine (and familial) bonds than a succession of bad blokes. Miller and Hendricks, miles away from the buttoned-up Joan Holloway in *Mad Men*, have a ball quarrelling, fantasising about Tom Selleck and insulting each other on the phone after a double date. As jagged and shout-y as Deb's life becomes, the film revels in the warmth between the two households, captured in a lovely wedding scene.

The film is overstuffed with story, particularly when it comes to the missing daughter aspect. Apart from the dubious use of a woman in peril purely as a catalyst for character transformation, it also feels redundant. There is enough conflict — be it economic constraints or coercive relationships — in the fabric of Deb's life to initiate an arc that feel more organic and less heavy-handed than a plot-line stolen from *Without A Trace*. Miller's skill as an actor perfectly modulates Deb's growth over a decade, not only delineating the passage of time without resorting to bad wigs and prosthetics, but also beautifully etching a woman getting her shit together. It's all a very long way from *Layer Cake*. **IAN FREER**

VERDICT It comes on like an *Unsolved Disappearance Movie* but *American Woman* morphs into something more interesting, a portrait of a woman gradually finding her place in the world. And Sienna Miller is stellar.



HITSVILLE: THE MAKING OF MOTOWN

★★★

OUT 4 OCTOBER / CERT 12A / 112 MINS

DIRECTORS Gabe Turner, Ben Turner

CAST Berry Gordy, Smokey Robinson, Stevie Wonder

Sponsored by Motown, *Hitsville...* is a soft but enjoyable overview of the birth of America's hit factory mostly relayed by its founder, Berry Gordy. Just as the company took its cue from the production line of Detroit's car factories, so the film follows each stage of the process (finding artists, production, image crafting) through talking heads and great archival footage. If you are after a warts-and-all documentary — stand-offs with Diana Ross (who doesn't appear) are glossed over — this isn't it. But it's good on the nuts-and-bolts of crafting the songs, provides a touching portrait of Gordy and Smokey Robinson's friendship, and of course the music itself — from Ross, Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder et al — is heaven-sent. **IF**



THE PEANUT BUTTER FALCON

★★★★

OUT 18 OCTOBER / CERT TBC / 97 MINS

DIRECTORS Tyler Nilson, Michael Schwartz

CAST Shia LaBeouf, Dakota Johnson, Zack Gottsagen

Early moments from *The Peanut Butter Falcon* could be grafted straight from one of Taika Waititi's pre-*Ragnarok* comedies. We join aspiring wrestler Zak (Gottsagen) — a 22-year-old with Down syndrome — in a sleepy coastal home, where the urge to become a champion drives him to escape his heavily regulated lifestyle and stow away on the boat of LaBeouf's feral fisherman Tyler. This is LaBeouf at his best, stripped down to his bare elements, aided by two luminous performances from Zack Gottsagen and Dakota Johnson, here playing Zak's wary if slightly underwritten careworker. The script may lack the *Huckleberry Finn* epicness that it sets out to achieve, but warms the heart with its parental tenderness nevertheless. **BW**

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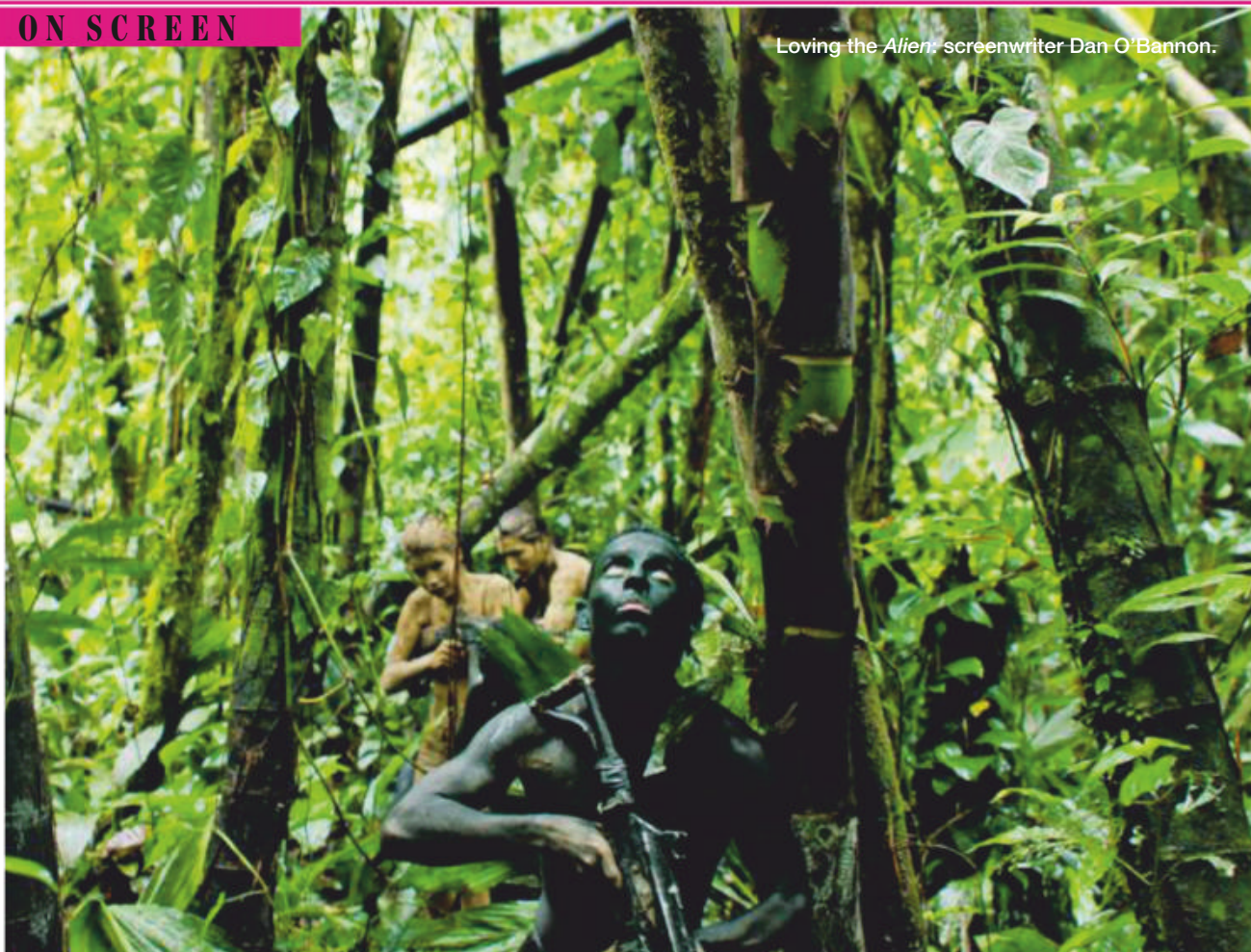
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Loving the *Alien*: screenwriter Dan O'Bannon.

[FILM]

MONOS

★★★★

OUT 25 OCTOBER
CERT 15 / 102 MINS**DIRECTOR** Alejandro Landes**CAST** Julianne Nicholson, Moises Arias, Sofia Buenaventura

PLOT High in the mountains of an unnamed South American country, a squad of child soldiers perform paramilitary exercises, look after a conscripted cow and hold an American doctor (Nicholson) hostage. But when the stronghold comes under attack, the kids and their captive scatter into the jungle where cracks in the unit begin to form.

ALEJANDRO LANDES' *MONOS* has the plot of 2010s YA drama but with the feel of 1970s Werner Herzog. The title means 'monkeys' in Spanish and refers to a bunch of feral kids playing at soldiers, trying to keep their hostage and their hormones under control. Uniquely, Landes' film is at once almost entirely plotless but also thrilling, mixing up breathless set-pieces with mesmerizing, textured filmmaking to create a nihilistic world where no rules apply and morality gets blurred in favour of simply staying alive.

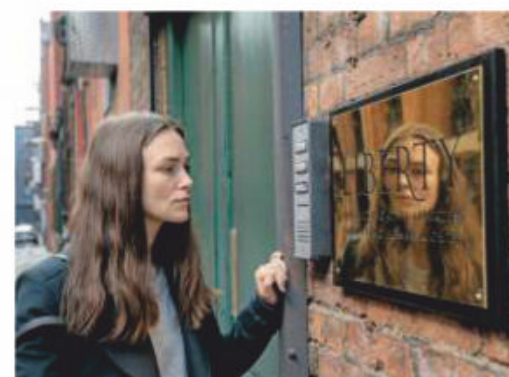
From the get-go, Landes plunges into a hostile, almost sci-fi environment with no context as a crutch. We start in the misty mountain-tops of a never-named South American country with a group of kids playing football blindfolded, a bell ringing signifying a goal. Put through their paces by their diminutive drill sergeant, the group — with pugnacious code names like Bigfoot (Arias), Rambo (Buenaventura), Wolf (Julián Giraldo) and Boom Boom (Sneider Castro) — fight boredom (they tie glowsticks to the resident cow, have an obligatory dance around a bonfire) and each

other as they wait for their orders from a mysterious outfit known as The Organisation. They torment their captive (a buttoned-down, jittery Nicholson), known only as 'Doctora', but, despite living in an adult world, never fully escape their adolescent impulses.

The first half is built around an axis of anarchy and tension which amps up into full-blown survival mode in the second half, as the kids and Doctora are thrown in the jungle to fend for themselves. Mudslides, escape attempts, mosquitos and a wild trip on mushrooms send the film into different zones of madness which build to a last third of inevitable violence. As the film goes on the Western world slowly creeps in — bizarrely a TV displays documentaries about gummy bears and Beethoven — but *Monos* operates in its own milieu. If initially it is difficult to discern the different personalities of the soldiers, Landes and writer Alexis Dos Santos compound confusion further by constantly shifting focus between characters, killing off protagonists, bringing seemingly minor characters to the fore. It's an unsettling approach that keeps you constantly off guard.

The touchstones are numerous — *Lord Of The Flies*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Intacto*, *Aguirre*, *The Wrath Of God*; there is even something of the immediate intimacy of Larry Clark's *Kids* in the teen-make out scenes — but Landes wears his referencing lightly on his sleeve. Instead, this is a singular, original work of heavy atmosphere, memorable images (from sweeping jungle vistas to huge close-ups of mud-covered faces), exciting action and dream-like logic, all propelled by Mica Levi's brutal percussive score, one of the best of 2019. Immersive is an overused word, but *Monos* feels more experiential and tactile than any 3D glasses or 4DX could muster. It's never an easy watch, but one well worth venturing into. **IAN FREER**

VERDICT If it's a hard film to like, *Monos* is ridiculously impressive filmmaking, savage and surreal, immediate but timeless. If Hollywood wanted to do a darker, grittier take on *The Goonies*, Landes is their man.



OFFICIAL SECRETS

★★★

OUT 18 OCTOBER / CERT 15 / 112 MINS

DIRECTOR Gavin Hood**CAST** Keira Knightley, Matt Smith, Matthew Goode, Ralph Fiennes

Official Secrets is the kind of film where the most suspenseful scene is built around an office printer. Keira Knightley excels as whistle-blower Katharine Gun, the GCHQ worker who leaked a secret memo revealing a US spying campaign designed to help ratify the 2003 invasion of Iraq. *Eye In The Sky* director Gavin Hood's film is a timely, ambitious but broad take on a complex subject — there is too much recapping to make sure we are always up to speed — but remains engaging as Gun's case is taken up by *The Observer's* Martin Bright (Smith) — there's a huge drama involving spellcheck — then Liberty lawyer Ralph Fiennes. But it's Knightley's Gun you'll remember and admire; steely, stirring but still recognisably human. **IF**



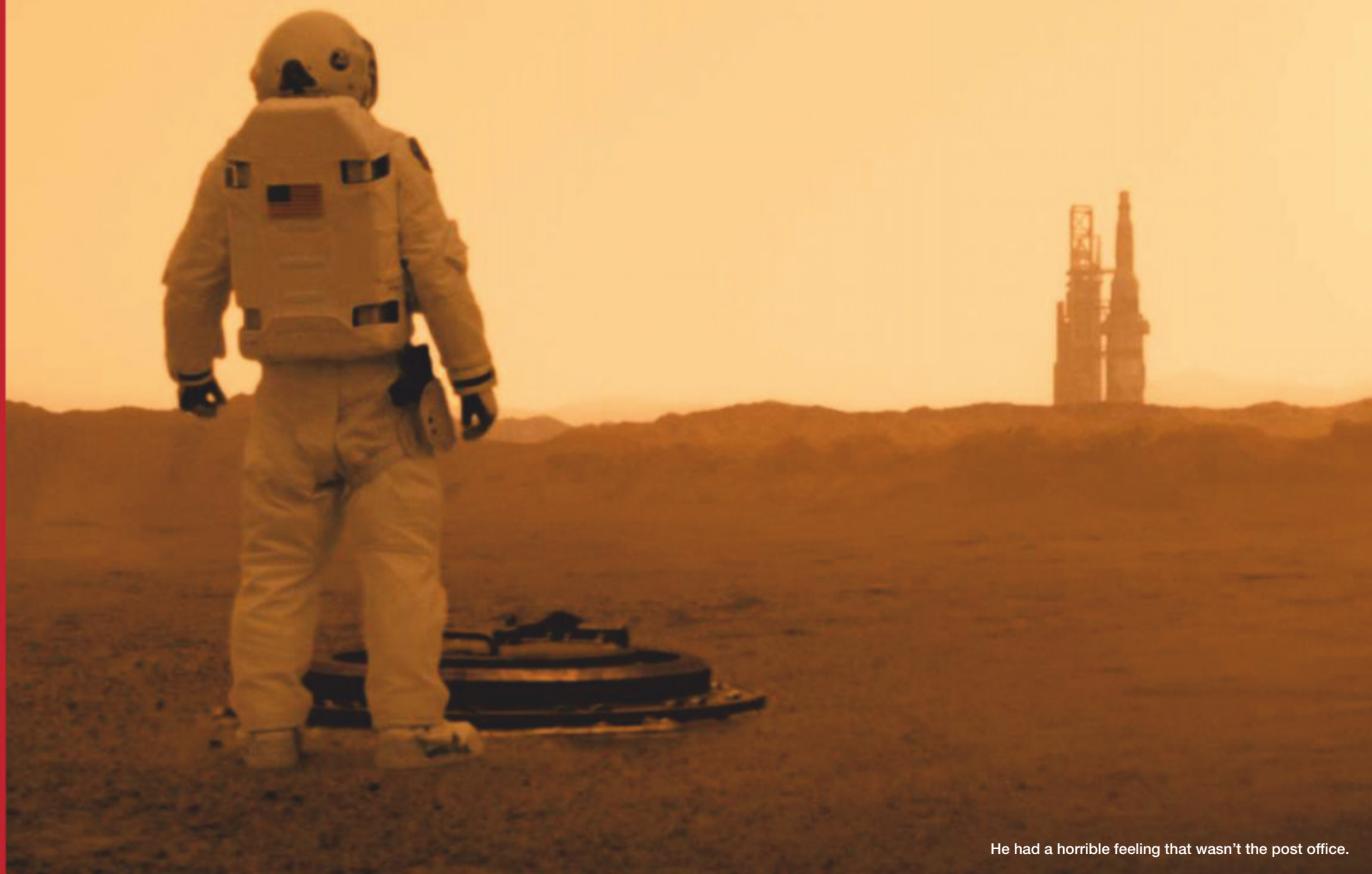
A SHAUN THE SHEEP MOVIE: FARMAGEDDON

★★★★

OUT 18 OCTOBER / CERT U / 87 MINS

DIRECTORS Will Becher, Richard Phelan**CAST** (voices) Justin Fletcher, John Sparkes, Kate Harbour

This second venture into big-screen sheep-nanigans for Shaun The Sheep is no less charming or lovely than his first attempt. Like before, it skews very young — the characters still only speak in gobbledegook, and the comedy is mostly goofy slapstick. But this remains the best of all-ages-appropriate entertainment, with insane levels of craft on show. Here, Shaun encounters aliens and *Men In Black*-esque spooks, and leaves the safe confines of his farm for distant galaxies — an ambitious task for any stop-motion animator. And it's packed to the barn rafters with visual gags, sci-fi nods and witty puns. (The literal bull in a literal china shop is a particular highlight.) **JN**



He had a horrible feeling that wasn't the post office.

[FILM]

AD ASTRA

★★★★★

OUT NOW
CERT 12A / 123 MINS

DIRECTOR James Gray

CAST Brad Pitt, Tommy Lee Jones, Donald Sutherland, Ruth Negga, Liv Tyler

PLOT The near future. Astronaut Roy McBride (Pitt) has lived in the shadow of his heroic father (Jones), who disappeared on a mission to find artificial intelligence in the universe. When electrical surges from space begin to hit Earth, Roy must travel across the solar system to find his father, the origin of the surge — and maybe more.

IT FEELS LIKE we've been spoiled by space. Ever since *Gravity* seemingly changed the game, science-fiction has had to work harder than ever to impress us. It's almost like the genre's peaked. Picking up the space-gauntlet, director James Gray quixotically heralded *Ad Astra* as being "the most realistic depiction of space ever". And fair dos, this film is *beautiful*: from the glistening cinematography to artfully celestial framing to the seamless visual effects (some shots use actual

photos of the moon's surface), it all looks real.

What sets it apart from recent gravity-defying films, however, is the setting. This is a future that feels familiar and deeply plausible, a world in which space travel has become commercialised, normalised, and blighted by the same overpriced pillows as the budget airline. The wonder of space has been replaced by the mundanities and conflicts of the Earth; the moon is a gaudy tourist trap and disputed territory, not unlike an episode of *Futurama*. Throughout, we're drip-fed morsels of information about the new inter-planetary infrastructure, and each revelation is a delicious bit of speculative world-building, 'sci-future-fact' rather than sci-fi.

It's a setting that also causes our nominal hero Roy (Pitt) some serious melancholy. Outwardly, Roy is cold and uncaring, his pulse never skipping a beat, his focus always on the mission. But his pessimistic voiceover laments the deterioration of the space era and hints at some familial yearning for his estranged father, who may be behind the catastrophic electrical surges that are suddenly plaguing Earth. Truly, you don't know abandonment issues until your dad is floating beyond Neptune.

Roy's narration sometimes sounds like a maudlin teenage diary ("I've let so many people down," he whines at one point), but he's a fascinatingly flawed hero, as incapable of emotions as he is a capable astronaut. His

odyssey through the inconceivable vastness of the solar system has something of Willard sailing up the river in *Apocalypse Now*: confronted by loneliness in an unforgiving environment, the indifference of death stalking at every corner.

For such an ambitious film, it's remarkably meditative; set across billions of miles, it is always only interested in Roy's interior life, the camera trained in heavy close-up on his tired-looking face. (Spare a thought for poor Liv Tyler, playing Roy's wife, who is often not even in focus, making her similar role in *Armageddon* look positively generous.)

But despite a dip in pace towards the end, it's also a fantastically well-staged adventure. There's a (literally) head-spinning opening sequence at the 'International Space Antenna', an encounter with an unexpected space-primate, and a moon-buggy chase which offers a thrilling preview of what 'Fast & Furious In Space' might look like. It has fun, even if its leading man doesn't.

Through all this, it manages to ponder the existential questions facing humanity, and brings it back to the humanity we need to face. That, above the realistic depictions of space, is probably its real achievement. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT Existential but also intimate, *Ad Astra* is a stunning, sensitive exploration of the space left by an absent parent — and the infinite void of actual space.



"So this is tap water? Oh. My. God."

[TV]

THE POLITICIAN

★★★★

OUT NOW / NETFLIX
EPISODES SEEN ALL

SHOWRUNNER Ryan Murphy

CAST Ben Platt, Zoey Deutch, Lucy Boynton, Gwyneth Paltrow, Bob Balaban, David Corenswet

PLOT Payton Hobart's (Platt) destiny is becoming President of the United States. The first stage in his ascent is to be elected president of his senior class and go to Harvard. But first he must find a running mate — perhaps sympathetic cancer victim Infinity (Deutch) — and defeat determined opponent Astrid (Boynton).

RYAN MURPHY'S LATEST hyper-mannered, hyper-articulate look at the lives of the rich and disgraceful isn't always as biting as it should be, but when it works it's glorious. This is a show about the strange emptiness of politics, and the ways that we have all become politicians in an age of social media overexposure and crippling self-awareness. But it's also a pleasingly ridiculous soap opera and a chance for Gwyneth Paltrow to send herself up. If it becomes a little chaotic in the third act, at least it promises great things for an almost-but-not-quite-anthology show to come.

Our hero(ish) is Ben Platt's open-faced, angel-voiced and absolutely ambitious Payton Hobart. He has known, definitively, since childhood that he will one day be US President; all that remains is to actually win the election. He has a loyal campaign team and a picture-perfect girlfriend (Julia Schlaepfer), but the first step is to find a running mate in his campaign for high school senior class president. Enter sympathetic Infinity (Zoey Deutch), a peppy cancer patient with terrible judgment and a mercenary streak. Payton's up against

determined opposition too, first from likeable sports star River (David Corenswet) and the more formidable Astrid (Boynton).

All, it's fair to say, does not go to plan. There are outrageous betrayals, abuse, self-harm, political gaffes, poison, secret investigations and far more polling than any high school should be subjected to (one episode, focusing on an apathetic voter being driven nearly to madness by the campaign, is an inspired look at how little ordinary people want to think about this stuff). None of that is boring, but it's a lot soapier than we maybe need. The political satire is good as far as it goes, in examining the tightrope that every candidate must walk to avoid offending in a liberal, intersectional environment like this ritzy California school, and there's a timely swipe at the US college admissions scandal. Yet there's little to no attempt to deal with the rise of populism or the existential challenges posed to liberal democracy by that attack. Maybe in Season 2, set up in the final episode here.

Even as the tight, *Election*-style premise falls apart and Boynton and Deutch are somewhat sidelined, there's still lots to love. Paltrow is in full Wes Anderson form as Payton's unhappy mother, sending up her own love of alternative medicine but injecting humour too ("That's the fourth time someone has jumped out a window when I tried to break up with them," she sighs). Platt is deeply engaging, shifting smoothly from likeably sincere to horrifically image-conscious. But everyone around him is just as self-aware. All our heroes are trying to make meaningful connections while examining their every word for possible mistakes. It's no way to live, says the show: being a politician, or even trying to be, will fatally skew your values away from reality and towards disaster. And that rings awfully true right now. **HELEN O'HARA**

VERDICT Funny, sharp and extremely quotable, this only falls short of greatness when it seems to lose the thread of its own satire in the second half and move from biting to bullet-riddled.

ON SCREEN CHECKLIST

Your at-a-glance view of this month's reviews



OUT NOW

AD ASTRA	★★★★	P49
DOWNTON ABBEY	★★★★	P42
HUSTLERS	★★★★★	P40
THE GOLDFINCH	★★	P44
THE LAUNDROMAT	★★★★	P38
THE POLITICIAN	★★★★	P50
RAMBO: LAST BLOOD	★★	P44

4 OCTOBER

HITSVILLE: THE MAKING OF MOTOWN	★★★★	P46
JOKER (ABOVE)	★★★★★	P36
JUDY	★★★★	P42

11 OCTOBER

ABOMINABLE	★★★★	P44
AMERICAN WOMAN	★★★★★	P46
FARMING	★★	P38
THE DAY SHALL COME	★★★★★	P41

18 OCTOBER

A SHAUN THE SHEEP MOVIE: FARMAGEDDON	★★★★★	P48
MYSTIFY: MICHAEL HUTCHENCE	★★★★★	P44
NON-FICTION	★★★★★	P44
OFFICIAL SECRETS	★★★★	P48
THE PEANUT BUTTER FALCON	★★★★★	P46

25 OCTOBER

BY THE GRACE OF GOD	★★★★★	P42
THE LAST BLACK MAN IN SAN FRANCISCO	★★★★★	P43
MONOS	★★★★★	P48
TALES FROM THE LODGE	★★	P44

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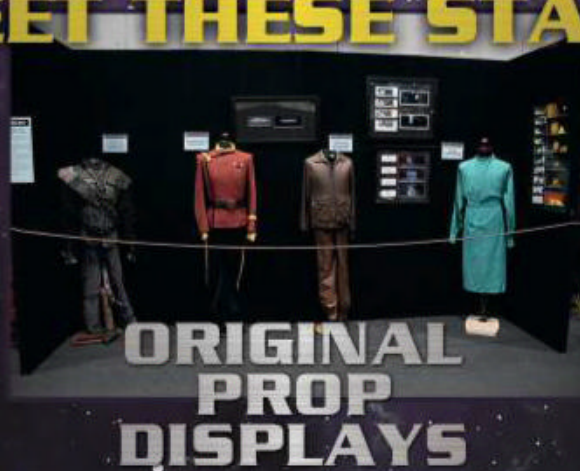
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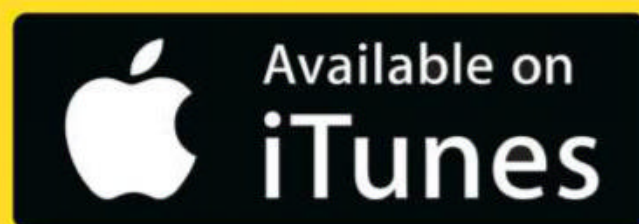
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ON SCREEN

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THAT MATTERS THIS MONTH



(THIS IS YOUR MASSIVE SPOILER WARNING! (DON'T SAY WE DIDN'T WARN YOU))

THIS MONTH: **IT CHAPTER TWO** P54 **THE DARK CRYSTAL: AGE OF RESISTANCE** P58

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THIS MONTH'S SPOILER TEAM



BILL SKARSGÅRD

Pennywise,
It Chapter Two



NICK DE SEMLYEN

Associate Editor (Features),
Empire



DAN JOLIN

Contributing Editor



JOHN NUGENT

News Editor,
Empire



BEN TRAVIS

Online Staff Writer,
Empire



AMON WARMANN

Contributor,
Empire



1 THE ATTACK

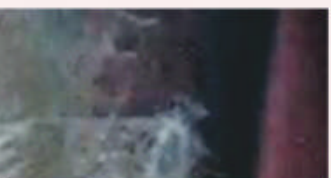
John Nugent: *Chapter Two*'s shocking opening sequence sees a gay couple (played by Taylor Frey and LGBT actor/filmmaker Xavier Dolan) subjected to a devastating homophobic attack — only for one of the victims to then suffer a demonic clown one, too. Reactions to this sequence have been mixed, but whether it oversteps the line for you or not, it's a pretty faithful recreation of the scene from the book, closely based on the real-life hate crime that killed Charlie Howard, a gay man from Bangor, Maine — Stephen King's hometown, and the loose inspiration for *Derry* — in 1984. The event weighed heavily on King, and his commentary on small-town intolerance feels more depressingly relevant than ever. Whether you felt the violence was exploitative or necessary, it's unlikely to leave your memory for some time.



Clockwise from main: It was more than a sore throat that was wrong with Pennywise; Cameo man Peter Bogdanovich; The Losers' Club reunited; Bad nudes for Bev; Pennywise's greasepaint remover was a tad harsh; Anyone for creepy sepia photos?; Uh-oh, caught in the Deadlights.

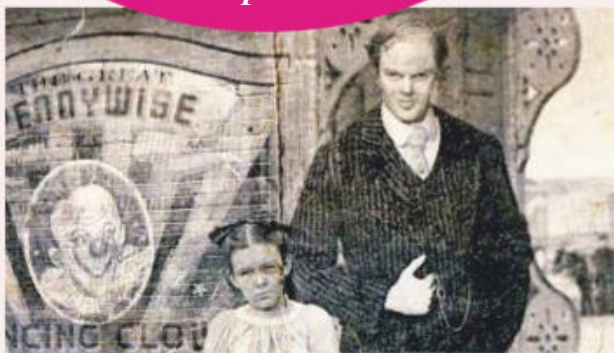
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2 PETER BOGDANOVICH

Nick de Semlyen: This is a film about sewer-aliens who feed on fear. Yet the weirdest thing in it may be the cameo from the owlish auteur of yesteryear, playing himself as the director of a major Warner Bros. movie. The only logical explanation: he's actually Pennywise, and killer clowns love *Paper Moon*.



3 THE FORTUNE COOKIES

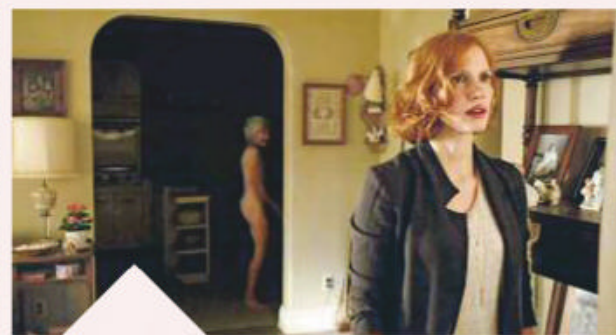
John Nugent: At first, everything at the Losers' reunion seems normal. Everyone's catching up, shooting the shit, and for a moment it feels like it could be just like old times... until it becomes *exactly* like old times. The scene plays out like a slicker, more terrifying update of a much-loved moment in the miniseries version. After quite literally spelling out the absence of Stanley (Andy Bean), it dips into some delicious creature horror, with the VFX excruciatingly more effective than the scrappy low-budget work of the early '90s. The writhing bird foetus is a particular high (or low) light. What gives this scene some extra oomph for all the characters is that, barring Mike (Isaiah Mustafa), they've somehow all forgotten Pennywise, their years spent away from Derry giving them demon-amnesia — so everything feels brand-new.

6 PENNYWISE'S HUMAN FORM

Nick de Semlyen: Like Heath Ledger's Joker in *The Dark Knight*, it's never clear whether the shreds of backstory we get for Pennywise are true or trickery. When Beverly goes back to her old home, she sees a photo on the wall of Mrs Kersh's father — Bill Skarsgård minus clown make-up — next to a wagon marked "Pennywise the Dancing Clown". A few minutes later, she sees the same man painting his face in white make-up, then scraping his nails down it to make a bloody mess as he leers at her. Was the monster ever truly a man, or is it just It messing with the Losers' heads? Whatever the case, it's

4 THE RITUAL OF CHÜD

Ben Travis: There was no escaping it. In *Chapter Two*, Andy Muschietti had to depict the Ritual of Chüd, the novel's cosmic battle against It that takes place on a sort of astral plane. Here the ritual is simplified and gives the story its structure, with each grown-up Loser forced to find a personal 'totem' artefact from their youth to use in the ceremony. As in the novel, its origin is (dubiously) Native American, with Mike receiving a vision of a native tribe as the first humans to face It. As outlandish as Chüd seems, it's central to King's thesis on fear: that it exists in the mind, can be faced head-on, is best defeated when working together, and that its very heart can be crushed.



5 BEV GOES HOME

Ben Travis: Beverly's (Jessica Chastain) search for her totem — the poem a young Ben wrote for her — brings her back to her childhood home where she meets new owner Mrs Kersh (Joan Gregson). Of course, the kindly old lady is really Pennywise in disguise, and Muschietti expertly builds the tension in their encounter. It's a sequence that plays into the fundamental horror of the uncanny — everything is just a little off-kilter, from the stuck record to her overly long smile. Plus, it gives us a glimpse of a human Pennywise in a photo of Mrs Kersh's circus-owner father — a moment creepier and more spine-tingling than the long-limbed pensioner-monster Kersh mutates into.

one of the film's more distressing images, and that's saying something.

Bill Skarsgård: With Pennywise, nothing's too crazy. Anything is allowed. Andy just keeps on rolling and lets me do things again and again. You end up not knowing what the fuck is going to happen and becoming completely detached from everything. You're just in this trance state. The pulling of the eyes was improvised. That happened in the moment. And then later they added the blood coming through [the make-up]. We found a lot of weird little moments on set.



7 BILL VS BILL

John Nugent: The idea of a character facing their inner demons by taking on a personification of themselves isn't new (you can find examples of similar ideas in *Logan* and *Us*, among others), but few scenes have quite as much resonance as an adult character literally killing his child self. Recreating the flooded basement from the first film, Bill (James McAvoy) hallucinates his dead younger brother, Georgie, and must once again confront his guilt. Critics of the film have noted that it's more or less the same lesson he learned in the first film, now learning it all over again, having rather conveniently suffered amnesia in the intervening years. But the scene largely works, thanks to McAvoy's heartbreaking performance as the adult Bill, being treated to the kind of intense VR psychotherapy that Tony Stark would spend millions on.



Above: Bill (James McAvoy) hallucinates his teen life, and brother Georgie.

Left: Congrats, Eddie (James Ransone) — you are this movie's Big Death.

Below left: Author Stephen King looking off-brand chirpy.



8 STEPHEN KING CAMEO

Nick de Semlyen: King has cameoed in a gazillion adaptations of his work. But he gets an especially chunky scene here, as the storekeeper who sells Bill (James McAvoy) back his bike. Bill being an avatar of the writer himself, King slips in a cheeky self-critique, saying of a scary novel, "I didn't like the ending."

9 EDDIE AND STANLEY

Ben Travis: For all its killer clown-demons and funhouse trappings, *It Chapter Two* is all about the re-emergence of childhood trauma and repressed memories. The psychological scars left by Pennywise are invoked right from the opening act — the grown-up Stanley Uris dying by suicide rather than going back to Derry. Stanley directly suffered at Pennywise's hand in the first film — It gets its jaws around his head, leaving physical scars that can be seen on his grown-up incarnation. His death bookends the film too,

ending on the letter he writes to the Losers' Club to explain his choice — a reminder of the loss and tragedy that Pennywise wrought.

Eddie Kaspbrak (James Ransone) is *Chapter Two's* Big Death — his heroic effort to pull Richie from *It's Deadlights* (a terrifying form of energy) landing him with a tendril through the chest. It's a different demise to the one in King's novel (there his arm is chomped off and he bleeds out). It's fitting that the risk-averse Eddie — who's grown up to become a risk analyst (rather than a limo rental company owner, as in the book) — puts himself in mortal peril to save his friend. It's all the more tragic that the person he dies for is Richie — Muschietti making explicit the comedian's repressed homosexuality and feelings for Eddie.

"That's not a knife..." Dave Chapman's Emperor/Ordon.
Below: Seladon denounces her family to join the Lords of the Crystal; The Scientist gets an eyeful.

The Dark Crystal: Age Of Resistance



1 THE PEEPER BEETLE

Dan Jolin: Much like the original 1982 movie, *Age Of Resistance* admirably refuses to treat its family audience like delicate little flowers, serving up a squirming platter of creep-out moments, brutal violence and torture — like all the best classic fairy tales. The most memorable and distressing comes at the end of the second episode, when the Scientist (Mark Hamill) is punished for letting Rian (Taron Egerton) escape with the Essence. First, a skeletal cage is placed over his beaky head, in a disturbing echo of the Room 101 rat cage from Orwell's *1984*. Then a skittering bug is released onto the shrieking Scientist's face.

Director Louis Leterrier pushes the PG rating as far as he can, even showing the nasty little Peeper Beetle gleefully prising the Skeksis' eyelids open, before cutting to a final, POV shot



of the pouncing insect, with the sound of ocular munching continuing over the black of the credits. This, apparently, was the "mildest" of three versions shot, according to executive producer Lisa Henson. Of course, it serves to explain why, in the movie, the Scientist has a cybernetic eye. And also possibly explains why Maudra Fara's Fizzgig has an eye patch; perhaps the grizzly furball lost a fight with a Peeper Beetle in the wild.

2 SELADON'S SKEKSIS MAKEOVER

Dan Jolin: Before news of the Skeksis' betrayal fully takes hold, the Gelfling seven tribes are susceptible to conflicting agendas. Though shocked by the murder of her mother, the All-Maudra (Helena Bonham Carter), by the Skeksis General (Benedict Wong), eldest daughter Seladon (Gugu Mbatha-Raw) resolves to take the throne and affirms her loyalty to the Lords of the Crystal, even denouncing her own mum as a traitor. Seladon expresses this resolution, striding into the throne room in an outfit that mirrors the Skeksis' robes and carapace-like mantles. It is a truly disquieting transformation, undercutting the image of the Gelfling as universally noble and heroic. But not as upsetting as the scene that follows two episodes later, when in Episode 8, the Skeksis descend upon Seladon and spitefully disrobe her.

WARNING! SPOILERS! SPOILERS! SPOILERS!

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3 THE PUPPET SHOW

Dan Jolin: Exposition is always tricky. Too often, it's clunkily handled: by a wodge of voiceover, a flashback, a reading from a dusty tome, or just a wise-old-man monologue. But when *Age Of Resistance* has to conduct its crucial, join-the-dots-with-the-movie history lesson during Episode 7, it finds a solution that's borderline genius. It has its expository characters — in this case the Skeksis/Mystic double act of The Heretic (Andy Samberg) and The Wanderer (Bill Hader) — perform it via “that most sacred and ancient of arts”: a *puppet show* (its announcement accompanied by comedic groans from the gathered-hero audience).

Not only is this all pleasingly meta, it's also a towering artistic and technical achievement — The Jim Henson Company performers had to manipulate their puppets in such a way that *they* manipulate intricately designed miniature versions of themselves, with cutting-edge finger puppeteer Barnaby Dixon stepping in for the show's centrepiece moment, in which a mini-Gelfling hero attacks the Castle of the Crystal. It apparently took 150 people to pull off the complex scene — an astonishing amount of effort for three minutes of exposition.



5 THE FINAL BATTLE

Clockwise from top left: A teeny puppet urSkek from Heretic and Wanderer's show; The infected Deet; Feeling crabby with the Garthim; A vision of Deet going Dark; Chamberlain voice ace Simon Pegg.

Amon Warmann: The age of resistance finally begins in earnest in the last episode of the season, which unites all seven Gelfling clans against the Skeksis in the battle at Stone-in-the-Wood. It's an ambitious sequence loaded with incident, including the resurrection of Aughra and Deet using the Darkening to kill skekLach, forcing the other Skeksis to retreat. Arguably the biggest reveal of the brutal skirmish comes when Rian stabs the Skeksis General with

the Dual Glaive, a weapon which we soon come to learn has the lost shard of the Crystal of Truth as its hilt. In addition to being hugely important to the Skeksis' ultimate defeat, Rian's attack drained some of the General's essence into the crystal. Given that the Darkening which Deet has been infected with can only be transferred and not destroyed, there's a chance that the shard will be put to other uses before it's reunited with the Crystal of Truth.



4 THE VOICE CAST

Dan Jolin: *Age Of Resistance*'s voice pedigree is insane. There's a bit of *Game Of Thrones* (Nathalie Emmanuel, Lena Headey, Natalie Dormer), some *Harry Potter* (Jason Isaacs), and a lot of US comedy (Andy Samberg, Bill Hader). Top marks to Simon Pegg, though, for that utterly spot-on Chamberlain impression. Mmm-mmm?

6 DEET'S FATE

Dan Jolin: The Gelflings' victory comes at a terrible cost. Having set up optimistic Deet (Nathalie Emmanuel) as the sweetest and most likeable of the heroes, and planted the seeds of a romance between her and Rian, the finale ends with the poor Grottan seemingly consumed by the sinister, purpley power of the Darkening. This raises big questions for the next season. Either Deet's salvation will form one of the main plot strands, with Rian no doubt desperate to track her down to find a way to de-Darken (Lighten?) her. Or she will present an active threat as a potent new villain. We had a heavy hint at this in Episode 8 when she absorbed the power of the Sanctuary Tree and saw a vision of her future as a veiny, purple-eyed Dark Deet, crouched on the Skeksis throne. Though this also suggests she'll hardly be an ally of the Skeksis. She already killed The Collector (Awkwafina), and with four more Skeksis to go before the movie's chronology starts, she may now have a taste for lizard-thing blood.



7 THE GARTHIM

Amon Warmann: *Age Of Resistance* reveals the terrible truth behind the creation of the Crab-like creatures the Garthim. In the final moments of the season, the Skeksis Scientist combines the carcasses of two different species — the Gruenaks and the Arathim — to form the ruthless monsters, who will go on to become the Gelflings' biggest threat in *The Dark Crystal*. The good guys suffer a lot of losses in the prequel series, and the fact that the Gruenaks had just begun to rebel against their Skeksis overlords after being forced into slavery makes their ultimate fate especially cruel. The introduction of the Garthim suggests we can expect to see characters like skekUng — the Garthim master from the original movie — make an appearance in the near future, as they prepare for the war to come.

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MARK NEWBOLD

Favourite *Empire* cover?
Issue 301 [July 2014] — the ‘Han
in carbonite’ cover.

Favourite director?
Steven Spielberg.

Favourite film?
The Empire Strikes Back.

What do you love most about *Empire*?
It's interesting, informative and funny.
I can either dip into it at leisure
or deep dive for an afternoon.

What does *Empire* mean to you?
It's one of the true constants in my life and the only mag I've subscribed to since the '80s.



SARA LOVELL

Favourite *Empire* cover?
I love any 'special' covers — I have a Gandalf lenticular cover from December 2012 that I really like.

Favourite director?
Steven Spielberg.

Favourite film?
Back To The Future.

What do you love most about *Empire*?
Detailed articles; good photography and illustration; accessible without being flimsy or trashy.

What does *Empire* mean to you?
It's been part of my life since the very first issue. I still have every single one.



PETER GOODWIN

Favourite *Empire* cover?
Suicide Squad — Harley Quinn
[September 2016].

Favourite director?
Frank Capra.

Favourite film?
Brotherhood Of The Wolf.

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A close-up, low-angle shot of a Star Wars helmet, likely belonging to a Stormtrooper, with a blaster rifle attached. The helmet is dark and metallic, with various details like the visor and sensor array visible. The background is dark and out of focus, showing some smoke or dust.

DARKKNESSES RISING

----- ● ----- WORLD EXCLUSIVE ----- ● -----

AFTER NINE FILMS AND 42 YEARS, THE *STAR WARS* SAGA

FINALLY COMES TO AN END THIS DECEMBER.

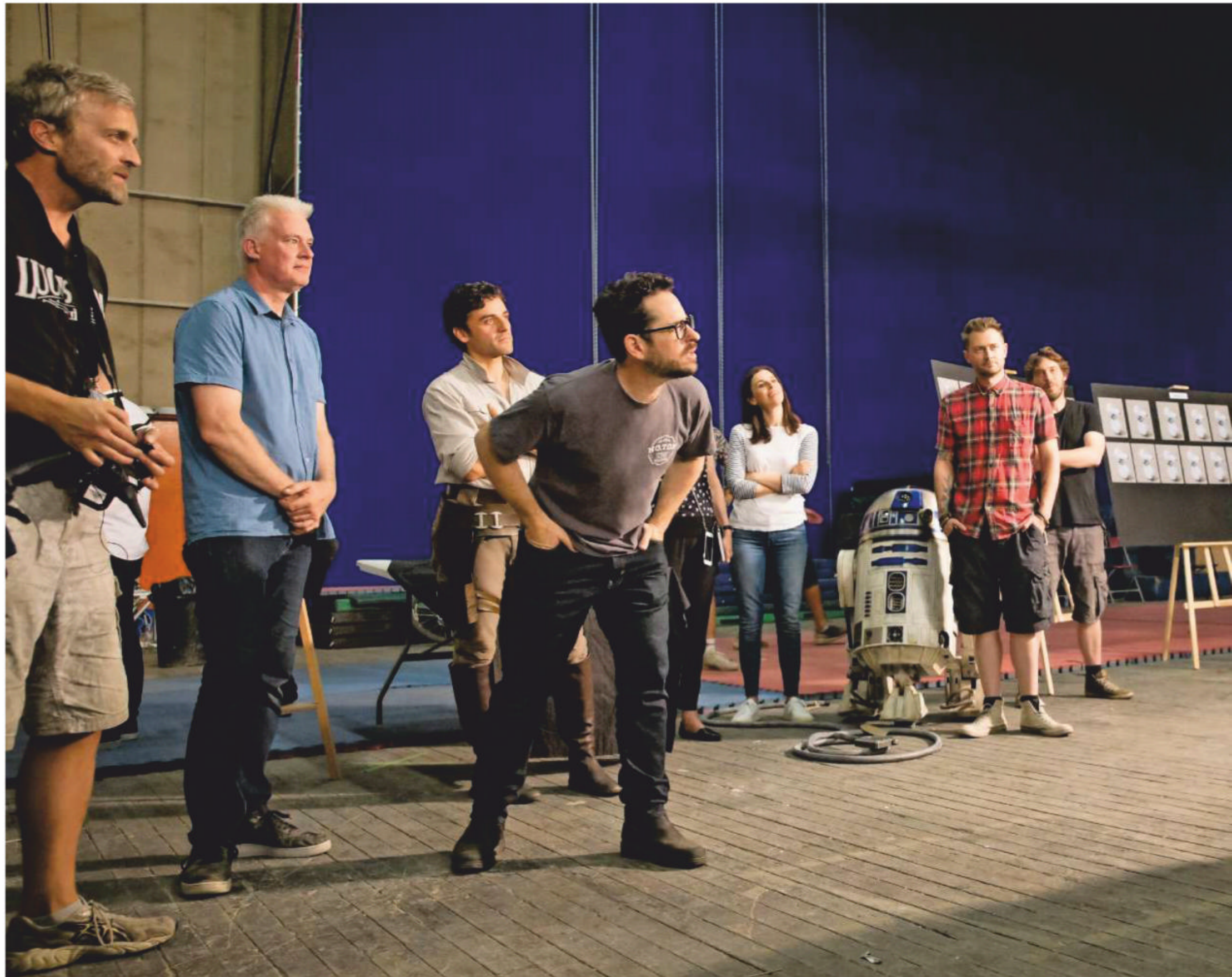
IN A WORLD EXCLUSIVE, *EMPIRE* SPEAKS TO THE

DIRECTOR, WRITER AND PRODUCER OF *THE RISE OF*

SKYWALKER – THE MOST ANTICIPATED FILM OF THE YEAR



WORDS JAMES DYER



IT ALL STARTED with a Jane Campion retrospective. The Lincoln Center in New York was entering night two of an in-depth celebration of the Kiwi filmmaker's work when, during a sold-out screening of *The Piano*, one member of the audience received a text message. He then received another. And another. Hunched down in his seat towards the middle of the auditorium, screenwriter Chris Terrio glanced furtively at his mobile as yet another text pinged to life on his screen. It was from J.J. Abrams. Just like the last. And the dozen or so before that.

It was 10 September 2017, and several hours earlier Terrio had received the first in what would become a torrent of communication: "I've just signed on to Episode IX," it read. "We're gonna write a new script. Would you consider writing it with me?"

"He didn't even say the words 'Star' and 'Wars,'" recalls Terrio, with a laugh. "He didn't have to. I'd been about to go off and direct a small movie, but when you hear *Star Wars*, everything else goes away."

Terrio agreed on the spot, planning to join Abrams in California as soon as his schedule would allow. But the texts kept coming. Throughout the afternoon, thoughts, ideas and questions popped up one after the other; Abrams' frantic thumbs tapping out the first seeds of story and flinging them across the country to his newfound partner. And so, with Michael Nyman's haunting score swelling around him and a still-buzzing handset in his grasp, Terrio stood up, shuffled apologetically along a row of seats, and

— ● —
Director J.J. Abrams, cast and crew confront Klaud, the Resistance's newest addition, at Pinewood Studios.



walked out of the cinema, leaving Campion's Oscar darling behind.

"J.J. is constantly brimming with ideas and, in the very best way, he's very impatient about them! So we just started getting into it then and there. I got on a plane to LA the next day."

Less than a week earlier, however, *Episode IX's* future hadn't looked nearly as certain. In development for the past two years under the auspices of *Jurassic World* director Colin Trevorrow, the film had abruptly flown off the rails on 5 September, when it was announced that Trevorrow was off the project. Rumours of script disagreements circled, but regardless of the reason, Lucasfilm had a serious problem: arguably the most important film in *Star Wars'* history suddenly had no director, no story and a release date drawing nearer by the day. So Lucasfilm President Kathleen Kennedy sent up a flare to the one man she knew without any doubt could safely take *Star Wars* over the finish line.

"Getting involved in *IX* came as a bit of a shock," recalls J.J. Abrams. "I had completed *VII*, Rian [Johnson] was doing *VIII*, and I was not meant to do *IX* at all. But the opportunity to not just finish the trilogy, but to finish the story that George began — this trilogy of trilogies — was too compelling and too tempting to reject."

After delivering *The Force Awakens*, then the third-biggest movie in history, Abrams had taken a bow and walked away, returning to Bad Robot and a pair of TV pilots he'd been meaning to write. It was here, in his self-imposed exile, that Kennedy



sought him out. Sure, it was an office just over a mile from Santa Monica pier rather than the grassy bluffs of Ahch-To, and Kennedy hadn't so much climbed 500 hand-carved steps as punched ten digits into her phone but, like a vision of *Episode VII*'s final moments, there she was. Unexpected. Holding out something Abrams had thought lost and daring him to take it back.

"It's exponentially the most daunting thing I've ever been involved with," Abrams admits, eyebrows raised as if he still can't quite believe the magnitude of the task. "But it was more exciting than it was anything."

The director sits across from us in his suite at Beverly Hills' Montage hotel, not far from where we last met, six years previously, when he'd just started work on a treatment for what would eventually become *The Force Awakens*. Abrams' return as *Star Wars*' Supreme Commander was announced just one day after Trevorrow's departure, allaying the fears of both fans and shareholders alike: voices just a day before crying out in terror, now suddenly silenced. But with only two years to end a saga that had been four decades in the telling, it was clear from the outset he was going to need some help. And so he composed a text (then several more) and sent them flying towards a movie theatre 3,000 miles away, where the Oscar-winning screenwriter of *Argo* was attempting to watch a film.

"I've admired Chris Terrio's writing for a long time. I called on him because I knew it would be a challenge. But I didn't know

— ● —
Top: Martial art experts put Daisy Ridley through her paces. **Above:** Abrams with Oscar Isaac in Jordan.



it would be quite as challenging as it was."

In a time when vast, interconnected stories have become commonplace, and breadcrumbs to the payoffs in *Avengers: Endgame* can be traced back ten or even 20 films, it's hard to believe that the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy didn't have its course firmly locked in before *Episode VII* ever left the spaceport. But, just as Abrams himself left neither chart nor compass for Rian Johnson to navigate with, so he began work on *The Rise Of Skywalker* with nothing to guide him but his wits. It is, by Abrams' own admission, his preferred method of working. An instinctive storyteller by nature, his impulse is to do what feels right in the moment, rather than slavishly adhere to some pre-ordained master plan. Very appropriately for a franchise so rooted in this exact philosophy, Abrams' inclination has always been, as Alec Guinness once sagely advised, to stretch out with his feelings.

"You can't plan everything in advance — which my 'Revenge Of The Jedi' poster proves," he says. "You have a better idea and then you implement it. When I was working on *VII*, I'd be lying if I said I knew everything that was gonna happen in *VIII* and *IX*. I had some ideas, but we had a release date that required us to work on *VIII*!"

So Abrams and Terrio started from scratch. They spitballed ideas during the day, swapped rapid-fire texts at night and, piece-by-piece, set about exploring the fundamental questions



this final movie had to address. Not least of all the aftermath of *The Last Jedi*, in which Rian Johnson, continuing Abrams’ story, had made some rather significant changes.



THERE’S A WELL-WORN dramatic principle most commonly ascribed to Anton Chekhov that insists if you see a gun in the first act of a play, it *must* go off by act three or you’re simply wasting the audience’s time. The same, it appears, is true of dark side degenerates as, despite being sidelined in *The Last Jedi*, Chekhov’s Knights Of Ren will finally go off in *The Rise Of Skywalker*.

The Knights — from which Kylo draws the latter part of his name — are a nightmarish squad of enforcers who do the bidding of the former Ben Solo. A rag-tag band of thugs and killers decked in black just like their leader, though far more battleworn. Armoured in disparate styles — one sports a cowl, one an angry welder’s mask, another a checkered draughtboard faceplate — they pack a similarly eclectic arsenal, from multi-barrelled assault cannon to oversized, anime-style sword, poleaxe and a wicked-looking mace.

Referenced portentously in *The Force Awakens* and glimpsed so very briefly during Rey’s vision on Takodana, the Knights and their role in Kylo’s fall from grace were set up as a major piece of the

— ● —
Really big space
dog just out
of shot.
●
●
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Star Wars puzzle. That is until Johnson, who clearly didn’t share Abrams’ interest, dropped the idea, sweeping them briskly under the rug next to the mystery of Rey’s parentage and the bisected corpse of Supreme Leader Snoke. “Let the past die,” instructed Kylo Ren in *The Last Jedi*. “Kill it, if you have to.” A sentiment, one could argue, that cut to the very heart of Johnson’s film.

“We thought about that line a lot,” says Terrio. “Rian did something that any good second act will do, which is create the antithesis. In *The Force Awakens* Luke Skywalker is a myth Rey’s obsessed with and there’s a warm embrace of the past. What Rian suggested is the past is a mixed bag and you can’t rely upon it to tell you where to go in the future. What we’re doing with *Episode IX* is trying to create a synthesis between those two points of view.”

And so, just as the investigation into Rey’s lineage looks set to be reopened, so too are the Knights back with a vengeance (not to mention Abrams talisman Greg Grunberg as pilot Snap Wexley). With Johnson’s tenure over, we’re playing in Abrams’ yard once more, although our suggestion that he might somehow be trying to course-correct is given short shrift.

“I never found myself trying to repair anything,” Abrams interjects. “If I had done *VIII*, I would have done things differently, just as Rian would have done things differently if he had done *VII*. But having worked on television series, I was accustomed to creating stories and characters that then were run by other people. If you’re willing to walk away from the thing



that you created and you believe it's in trustworthy hands, you have to accept that some of the decisions being made are not gonna be the same that you would make. And if you come back into it, you have to honour what's been done."

And what has been done is significant. Luke Skywalker is dead, passing on his knowledge and the mantle of last Jedi to Rey; The Resistance has been all but wiped out; Snoke is gone; and Kylo Ren — now Supreme Leader Ren — is more broken than ever, riven by conflict through the unlikely bond he forged with Rey. Bold and decisive, Johnson's decisions changed the board entirely, his sharp turns and gear shifts delighting some while earning the ire of others.

"Any time you are telling a story that people deeply care about, there is bound to be discussion and debate," says Kathleen Kennedy. "That is something that has always been fundamental to the fabric of *Star Wars*."

For Abrams and Terrio, meanwhile, the new landscape also brought with it new possibilities.

"Some of the most interesting scenes in *The Last Jedi* are the conversations between Rey and Ren," says Terrio. "We've tried to pick up that complicated relationship that really has been present ever since the interrogation in *Episode VII*. When Ren takes off his mask, there's a nakedness about him with Rey that he doesn't express to anyone else. Rian developed that in fascinating ways and we've been able to develop it even further."

Ren, left pointedly bare-faced by Johnson throughout *VIII*, now

— ● —
Top to bottom:
 Rey (Ridley), Finn
 (John Boyega),
 Chewbacca
 (Joonas
 Suotamo), and
 BB-8 listen
 intently to C-3PO
 (Anthony
 Daniels); Billy
 Dee Williams
 returns as Lando
 Calrissian;
 Joonas
 Suotamo, in
 Chewbacca's
 threads, plays
 with his son
 on set.



hides his face once more. It's a development that, while not a rebuke to *The Last Jedi*, demonstrates the different touchstones that resonate with each director. Although, Abrams expands, reuniting Kylo with his mask is about more than just sinister aesthetics.

"Having him be masked, but also fractured, is a very intentional thing. Like that classic Japanese process of taking ceramics and repairing them, and how the breaks in a way define the beauty of the piece as much as the original itself. As fractured as Ren is, the mask becomes a visual representation of that. There's something about this that tells his history. His mask doesn't ultimately hide him and his behaviour is revealed."

Ren's temptation by the light, like Rey's temptation by the dark, forms the spine of a moral ambiguity that Johnson built on in *VIII* and very much carries over to *IX*, bringing with it a sense that George Lucas' more clearly defined duality might be a relic of a simpler time. Neither light nor dark, *The Rise Of Skywalker* and its characters exist more within what could be considered the grey side of the Force — something underscored by the tantalising footage of 'Darth Rey' (complete with cowl, hangover pallor and double-bladed red lightsaber) that closed Abrams' D23 Expo footage presentation in Anaheim in August.

"I'd rather let that one lie," he deflects, when pressed on the subject. "But I will say that the movie has a number of things that you wouldn't expect to have happen and that you wouldn't expect certain characters to do. There are surprises along the way." He smiles, mischievously. "And that's one of them."



THE VALLEY OF The Moon in Southern Jordan has seen its share of action. Cut into the red sandstone cliffs near Aqaba, the striking lowlands known in Arabic as Wadi Rum have been visited by both real and fictional Lawrences of Arabia, stood in for the face of Mars, been the birth place of the Alien in *Prometheus*, and will next year double as the eponymous desert planet in Denis Villeneuve's *Dune*. It's no stranger to stormtroopers, either, having played host to the ill-fated Jedha outpost in Gareth Edwards' *Rogue One*. Today, though, Wadi Rum is a different part of the galaxy entirely, standing in for Pasaana: a new locale in the canon, and home to the bedouin-like Aki-Aki: a nomadic race of walrus-like aliens with twin tentacles dangling from their maws in place of tusks.

Pasaana, along with the nipplier climes of snow planet Kijimi, is one of several new worlds visited by *The Rise Of Skywalker*. But most importantly, it's a place where the heroes we've become acquainted with over the past two films will come together at last.

"The heart of *Star Wars* for me is the group of unlikely bedfellows on a breakneck adventure," says Abrams. "And in *Rise Of Skywalker* it's the biggest and most dastardly threat the galaxy has seen. The opportunity here was to have this group that has now become a surrogate family have to deal with this massive horror: the war to end all wars. Not just on the outside, but on the inside, which is to say it's meant to be as much of a challenge personally as it is physically."

Abrams' war of wars has been well equipped: The First Order is stacked with new brass in the form of Richard E. Grant's Allegiant General Pryde, neo-fascist ranks swollen by triangular-winged TIE Daggers and blood-red garrisons of newly commissioned Sith troopers, their angular crimson armour giving a fresh twist on the faceless squaddies — much to Hasbro's delight. The Resistance, too, will see its share of reinforcements, including Billy Dee Williams' Lando Calrissian — reprising the role after 36 years. Even General Leia Organa will return: the late Carrie Fisher making an appearance thanks to the discovery of unused footage that somehow fit the narrative perfectly.

The action itself has been teased in the barest glimpses: Rey and Kylo duelling on the wreckage of a Death Star; Rebel X-Wings and



blockade runners fleeing destruction; a sky bristling with Imperial Star Destroyers, their numbers great enough to block out the stars.

The presence of Old Empire firepower, easily overlooked, points to *The Rise Of Skywalker's* biggest curveball to date. Back in April, when Abrams showed the first trailer at *Star Wars* Celebration in Chicago, the reveal of the film's title was almost eclipsed by the familiar cackle of the original Emperor echoing over those final frames. When Ian McDiarmid himself walked out to demand, in full Palpatine rasp, that the projector "roll it again", all present lost their shit in unison. How could this be? Is he a clone? A Force projection? Did he survive that fateful plummet down the Death Star shaft? Could Palpatine have been telling Anakin the truth when he spoke of Darth Plagueis The Wise's cure for death? Irrespective of the fine print, *Star Wars'* biggest of bads is officially back in business.

"Some people feel like we shouldn't revisit the idea of Palpatine, and I completely understand that," Abrams concedes. "But if you're looking at these nine films as one story, I don't know many books where the last few chapters have nothing to do with those that have come before. If you look at the first eight films, all the set-ups of what we're doing in *IX* are there in plain view."

The sheer scale of the task he's undertaken cannot be overstated. *Star Wars* has been, by far, the most enduring and influential story of the modern era. Having to put the capstone on a saga that has shaped both childhoods and adult lives for several generations is something neither Abrams, nor producer Kathleen Kennedy, looking

— ● —
Is it time for now
Supreme Leader
Ren (Adam
Driver) to fulfill
his destiny?



ahead to what the future holds for *Star Wars*, take at all lightly.

"We don't have a crystal ball," says Kennedy. "We tried to look at *Solo* and see if we could do two movies a year, and we found, 'Hmm, that's not going to work.' So we backed off of that a little. But that doesn't mean we don't think about lots of different stories. That's the exciting thing about this universe."

"It's been an honour to inherit and continue this iconic saga that has touched audiences for so many years, and we feel the weight of that every time we set out to tell these stories."

The wider universe will, of course, live on. Whether through *The Mandalorian* on TV, or all-new movie sagas currently in development by Johnson and *Game Of Thrones'* David Benioff and D.B. Weiss. But for the core story, what for so many people is *Star Wars*, the final destination is now in sight.

"I've always loved the start of something," says Abrams, "because of what it promises. Endings are hard. A great ending not only needs to honour everything that's come before but, whether it's a novel, a series or a film, you want to have it feel like it could end no other way."

And so it comes back to feeling. In a world of meticulously planned franchises and strategic, multi-phased rollouts, *Star Wars*, at its core, has always trusted in The Force. Abrams had not expected to be here, had not expected to finish this tale. But now, as he places the final pieces of the puzzle, he feels like it was always meant to be. There's a symmetry to him being the one to deliver *The Rise Of Skywalker*, just as there is in the fact that, faced with this



near insurmountable challenge, his impulse was not to assemble story groups or worry about the top-down view, but to switch off his targeting computer, let go his conscious self and act on instinct.

"This story is alive, and you have to listen to it," he says. "When you land on something that gives you the chills, that's the only way you know if it feels right. You can deconstruct it all you want and try and make sense of how you found it, but somehow it finds you."

He pauses, reflecting for a moment. "I don't know how to explain it. Just the way I can't quite explain how we had this footage of Carrie that we're using. You can say, 'Oh well, it's just luck, it just happened to be,' but it feels like something else. And I neither can nor want to explain any of it."

Just as every saga has a beginning, so too will this one find its end. Abrams and Terrio have taken Lucas' vision to its conclusion, and the story that began on 25 May 1977 will end on 19 December 2019.

"It's been a pretty crazy ride," reflects Terrio. "When I was a kid watching *Return Of The Jedi* on loop, I felt like I was the only person Yoda was speaking to. And then there I was all these years later, sitting in a tent in Jordan doing this film. You have this highly personal relationship to *Star Wars*, and then, suddenly, you find yourself right in the middle of it. That feeling is sort of indescribable."

It's one that, at the very least, is almost certainly worth having a movie interrupted for. ●

Alamy

STAR WARS: THE RISE OF SKYWALKER IS IN CINEMAS FROM 19 DECEMBER

LOCATION DISLOCATION

WADI RUM ISN'T THE ONLY HIGHLY CHALLENGING
PLACE STAR WARS HAS FILMED



EPISODE IV: A NEW HOPE (1977)

LOCATION: **TUNISIA** • DOUBLING FOR: **TATOOINE**

Star Wars' very first location provided a baptism of twin suns fire. On 23 March 1976, the second day of filming was hit by rain, the first Tunisian winter storm in 50 years. After falling behind in the first week of schedule, George Lucas and co were hit by a freak sandstorm tearing the Sandcrawler set apart. The Tunisian sands also caused havoc, disturbing the signals directing the RD-D2 models and sending them out of control.

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EPISODE IV: A NEW HOPE (1977)

LOCATION: **TIKAL, GUATEMALA** • DOUBLING FOR: **YAVIN IV**

A small crew from ILM ventured to Tikal, Guatemala, in March 1977 to capture Rebel base exteriors. After 21 hours of travelling, the crew landed on a runway that was just a strip of mud. Eight guides led the team through jungles to a temple. To get the shot of a Rebel soldier high in a look-out point, the crew bolted a tin dustbin on a pole. Only model-maker Lorne Peterson was brave enough to climb into the makeshift crow's nest.



EPISODE V: THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK (1980)

LOCATION: **NORWAY** • DOUBLING FOR: **HOTH**

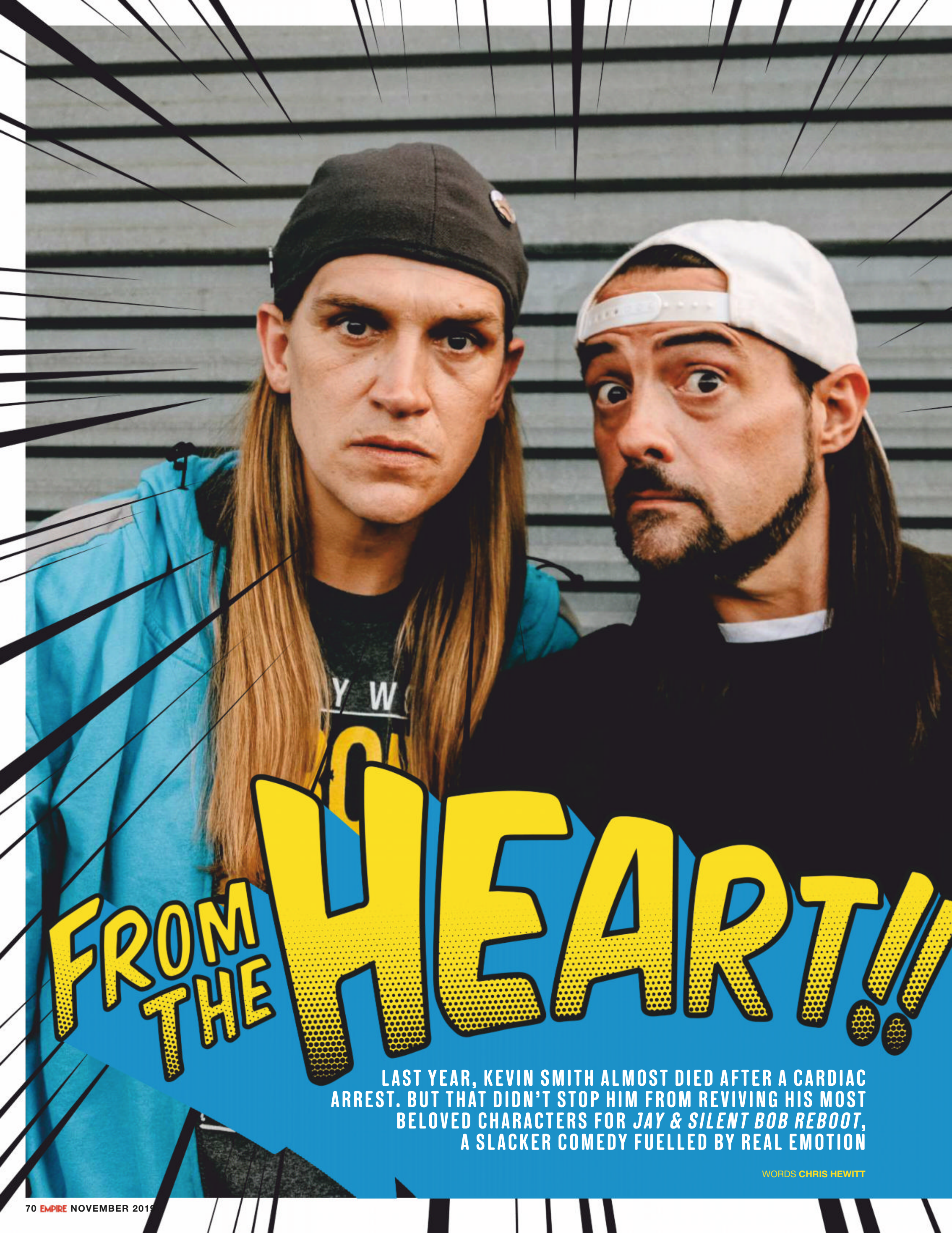
Echoing *A New Hope*, *Empire* started shooting with Norway's worst winter weather in 50 years, with temperatures dropping to -20°F and 18 feet of snow falling. Trapped in their hotel, the crew shot exteriors of Luke exiting the Wampa cave from outside the hotel doors. Film became so brittle it snapped. Mark Hamill and a skeleton crew braved blinding blizzards and suffered painful whiteouts. George Lucas took one for the team and supervised things from sunny San Francisco.

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EPISODE I: THE PHANTOM MENACE (1999)

LOCATION: **LEAVESDEN STUDIOS** • DOUBLING FOR: **CORUSCANT**

Forget sandstorms, ice wastes and jungle treks. The toughest *Star Wars* locations were the green-screens of Leavesden, capable of tripping up even the most seasoned of actor. 1960s icon Terence Stamp signed on to play Chancellor Valorum in order to work with Natalie Portman, but found himself playing opposite a bit of paper. He later told *Empire*: "Actors prefer to work with actors." IAN FREER



FROM THE HEART!!

LAST YEAR, KEVIN SMITH ALMOST DIED AFTER A CARDIAC ARREST. BUT THAT DIDN'T STOP HIM FROM REVIVING HIS MOST BELOVED CHARACTERS FOR *JAY & SILENT BOB REBOOT*, A SLACKER COMEDY FUELLED BY REAL EMOTION

WORDS CHRIS HEWITT

H

OLLYWOOD
DRIVE,
DESPITE
its name, is

about the last place on Earth you'd expect to see a movie being made. A quiet residential street in Metairie, Louisiana, part of the New Orleans metropolitan area, it's about 2,000 miles away from your actual Hollywood.

Yet on this sunny March day, a movie *is* being made here. You can tell by the trucks of equipment parked outside an old-school colonial-style house. And the lights and equipment set up in the driveway. And the people the lights and equipment are pointed at — a tall, gangly gentleman with long, blond hair, and a shorter, somewhat squatter chap with black hair and a goatee, sporting a heavy green coat and backwards baseball cap.

And, because this is a residential street near New Orleans, and not the sort of place you can shut down indefinitely, eventually a stream of cars has to be let through, drivers rubbernecking as they try to figure out just who the tall gent and his companion are. Because don't they look just like...? *Empire* watches several drivers mouth, "Silent Bob?" before one guy winds down his window and bellows, "SNOOTCHIE BOOTCHIES!" The catchphrase made famous by Kevin Smith's creations, Jay and Silent Bob, across six films — *Clerks*, *Mallrats*, *Chasing Amy*, *Dogma*, *Jay And Silent Bob Strike Back* and *Clerks 2* — spanning 12 years. And well might that delighted driver bellow it, for here, running through their lines, are Jason Mewes as Jay, and Kevin Smith as Silent Bob, back together again for the first time in over a decade. Snootch to the rebootch, if you will.



Left: Jay (Jason Mewes) and Silent Bob (Kevin Smith). **Top to bottom:** Falling foul of security; Multi-tasking Smith behind the camera; Ready for their close-ups.

It's a sight Kevin Smith fans had long given up hope of seeing. But here it is. And all because Silent Bob was very nearly permanently silenced.

JUST OVER A year before, Smith posted a picture on his Instagram featuring his now-trademark wide-eyed expression. Except this time, he was in a hospital gown, connected to all kinds of tubes, after suffering a "massive heart attack" in-between two stand-up shows in Los Angeles. He'd felt sick after the first performance, an ambulance had been called, and at a hospital in Glendale he'd been hit with a sobering thought: he could have died. His LAD artery, colloquially known as the Widow Maker, had suffered a 100 per cent blockage. Had he done the second show, instead of having a stent placed in his heart at the hospital, it's almost certain that he would have. "The mindfuck of it all was how close to death I came without being in any pain," Smith tells *Empire*. "When I had an anal fissure years ago, that was agony, dude. I still think about that pain to this day. The heart attack didn't even come close, but shit, it was real. Real as raincoats. And it made me treat shit more seriously."

Portly and proud of it, Smith had never been a poster child for healthy living. Yet the fire in his chest lit one under his backside. Several fires, actually. So, the Kevin Smith who is filling out Silent Bob's coat today isn't quite filling it out in the way he used to. He's noticeably thinner. Truth is, he looks great. All part of his sudden, snap decision to turn vegan (which, for a guy who doesn't really like vegetables, means the Impossible Burger has become his friend) and take up exercising. "I was just afraid of fucking >



dying,” says the director, who hasn’t lost his garrulous, swearsome nature, or the ability to drop a killer anecdote at a moment’s notice. “Fear of death made me eat green things that I never wanted to eat before, and made me hike three fucking miles up Runyon Canyon every day. I got a second chance, man.”

That second chance was also a creative one. Smith had been, for some time, trying to figure out a way to reconnect with some of his most beloved characters. A script for ‘Clerks III’ had been written a while ago, and then scrapped when Jeff Anderson, it is believed, didn’t want to reprise his role as acerbic video-store employee, Randal. On reflection, it seems, that may have been a good thing. “If *Clerks* is me in my twenties and *Clerks II* was me in my thirties, ‘Clerks III’ was almost middle age to the end,” says Smith. A recent reading of that script, for charity back in New Jersey, laid that bare. “It’s a sad script. It has a mass shooting and I don’t want to do that. I don’t want to send people to the movie theatre going, ‘I love *Clerks*!’ and all of a sudden it has this bleak ending.”

‘Mallrats 2’, too, fell through, due to rights issues. “Then I was like, ‘Wait! I own Jay and Silent Bob, so we’re going to do *Jay & Silent Bob Reboot*!’”

Which is why we’re here today, watching the long-awaited return of Jay and Silent Bob, 13 years after they ended *Clerks II* pretty much how they began *Clerks* — standing outside the Quick Stop in New Jersey. *Reboot*, while continuing the threads dangled by that movie (have a wild guess where we find our heroes as the movie begins) is, first and foremost, as the title suggests, a reboot of Smith’s free-wheeling, anarchic, deeply self-referential goof, *Jay And Silent Bob Strike Back*. The whole movie is predicated on the joke of, “We’re doing the same movie again,” laughs Smith. “It’s a remix in so many ways.”

So, today’s scene sees Shannon Elizabeth reprise her role from *Strike Back* as Justice, the girl who fell — against all the odds — for Mewes’ Jay. And in this scene, as she says an awkward goodbye to them while her new life partner, Reggie (played by Rosario Dawson), looks on, indicates where Smith might be taking this remix. As they hug, even as Jay clings on a little too long and a little too lecherously (Elizabeth’s suggestion following several fairly straight takes), there’s something unexpected in play here. Could it be... poignancy? A sense of actual regret on Jay’s part? Might this be... actual emotion? In a Jay and Silent Bob movie?

“It did turn into the post-heart attack movie,” admits Smith. “It did turn into something a little bit profound, while being fucking ridiculous and stupid. We maintain the joke pretty great, but it has to be about something more. I’m relatively sure after 25 years I know which button to push to make you laugh, but I want you to fucking feel. Honestly, I want you to choke up.”

Yet the surprising thing here is that it’s not a movie about mortality or death, but becoming



Above:
Pretzel logic:
the return of
Brodie Bruce
(Jason Lee).
Right:
Hammer
time: Jay
and the
judge (Craig
Robinson).

a father, as Jay finds out that his brief post-*Strike Back* dalliance with Justice resulted in a daughter, Milly. Who is played by Smith’s own daughter, Harley Quinn Smith. “That came off two things,” laughs Smith the elder. “The kid’s generally blonde-ish, and any time I put a picture on Instagram, people are always like, ‘Hey man, is Jay Mewes her fuckin’ father?’ And then, watching Jay be a dad for the last four years [Mewes has a daughter, Logan, with his wife, *Reboot* producer Jordan Monsanto]. Fuck, man, the guy least likely, the guy we all made fun of, the guy who’s the walking, talking, fucking time bomb, turned out to be hands-down the best father I’ve ever known. Jay being a dad in the movie was everything.” Though given that the scene immediately after the farewell to Justice sees Milly knock both her dad and Silent Bob out would indicate that the relationship has a way to go before it could be seen as cosy.

Smith, who remains as wonderfully candid as ever, knows that the heart attack has impacted on *Reboot* in several ways. The emotional heft is obvious. But it’s also tangible in the presence of





Elizabeth and Dawson, the latter in particular taking advantage of a day off on *Zombieland: Double Tap* to fly in for a single afternoon and reunite with her friend and *Clerks II* director. “It’s been beautiful; it’s been like that a lot,” smiles Smith. “That’s how we got everybody to come out. I’d call somebody and they’d be like, ‘I don’t know, man — New Orleans is four hours away.’ I’m like, ‘Do you realise I almost FUCKING DIED LAST YEAR?’ ‘Alright, I’m coming up.’ It was a very effective casting tool.”

And nowhere was it more effective than in recruiting one of the biggest stars on the planet. But, more importantly, repairing a friendship that Smith thought had long faded away.

MOST PEOPLE WON’T respond when they get a strange text from an unknown number. Especially when that text simply says, “This you?” But when Ben Affleck got that text from Smith earlier this year, not only did he respond, not only did it lead to *Reboot*’s most important cameo, but it led to the two, who hadn’t spoken in years, reconnecting. “Oh man, that was the



Top: Dante (Brian O’Halloran) faces the feds. **Above:** Jason Biggs and James Van Der Beek at ‘Chronic Con’ in the film.

real gift of *Reboot*,” says Smith. “So much so that if it came out and people are like, ‘This is the worst fuckin’ movie you’ve ever made,’ I’d go, ‘Yeah, but y’know... I got my friend back.’”

With the exception of Mewes, and Smith himself, Affleck has been in more Kevin Smith films than anyone. *Mallrats*, *Chasing Amy*, *Dogma*, *Jay And Silent Bob Strike Back* and *Jersey Girl* would make up the bulk of the box set, with an honourable mention to Affleck’s brief cameo in *Clerks II* as ‘Gawking Guy’. Since then, though, nothing. And the way Smith tells it, the two — as old friends often do — drifted apart, to the point where, when Smith broke the ice by texting, “This you?”, Affleck responded, “This me. Who this?”

A back-and-forth started, and eventually Smith nervously sent over a pre-planned invite for Affleck to come and play on *Reboot*, incorporating a King Osric quote from *Conan The Barbarian*. “It’s one thing to reach out to the dude, but another thing to reach out and instantly ask for a fucking favour, you know?” says Smith. “Finally he writes back, ‘It’s so telling that you still think of yourself as a king.’ And right there and then my heart melted. I said, ‘That’s Ben. That’s the same boy I made my childhood with. That’s the guy I made *Chasing Amy* with.’”

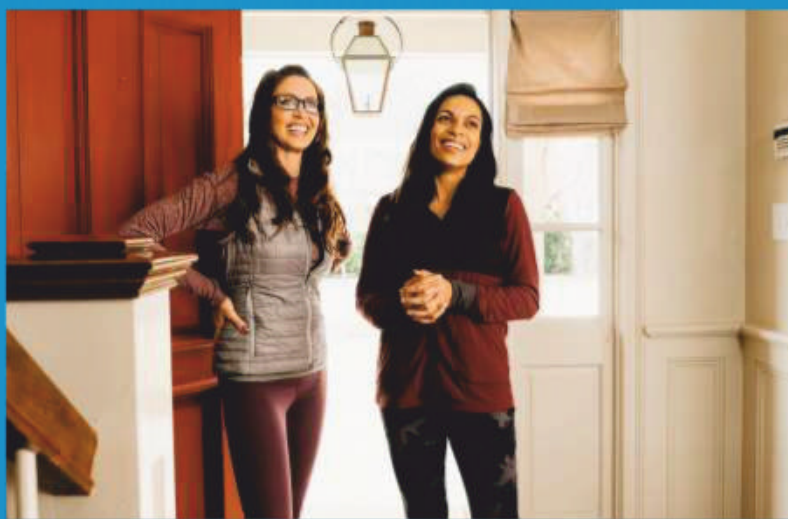
Smith had been prompted to get in touch with Affleck when an American film journalist called Kevin McCarthy had interviewed the actor for his new film, *Triple Frontier*, and asked if he’d been tapped for a *Reboot* cameo. (At that stage, it seemed, if you hadn’t been, you weren’t worth tapping.) Affleck replied that he hadn’t, but was open to it. And that sent Smith, who by then was deep into production on *Reboot*, into something of a spiral. “The last few years of my life, I don’t know how Ben Affleck feels about me because I haven’t heard from him,” he says. “And I would hate to reach out and say, ‘Hey, it feels like



we're not friends anymore and have him be like, 'You're fucking right.'"

But, egged on by his producers, Smith cued up his King Osric gambit as a tweet, and then — perhaps wisely — decided to keep it private. And now that Affleck had said yes, now that the lines of communication were open, Smith's head was spinning. Which is how Affleck, who had agreed to come and do a couple of hours as Cock Knocker, the villain of the 'Bluntman And Chronic' reboot that Jay and Silent Bob are trying to shut down, wound up with a vastly expanded role. "The next morning I texted him and said, 'Doing a couple of lines as Cock Knocker feels like a waste of resources. How'd you like to play Holden again?' And he said, 'I would love to do that.' So I wrote an eight-page sequel to *Chasing Amy*."

Which is how *Jay & Silent Bob Reboot* also functions as a follow-up to Smith's third and arguably most personal film, with Affleck reprising his role as tortured comic-book writer Holden McNeil and Joey Lauren Adams reappearing as Alyssa Jones, the lesbian artist he falls in love with but, ultimately, loses out on. And, without going too heavily into spoiler territory, Smith is confident that this unexpected bounty will satisfy fans of that film and also its harshest critics. "It transforms the movie," he says. "It's



Clockwise from top: With Jay's daughter Milly (Harley Quinn Smith); Justin Long as Brandon St Randy; Shannon Elizabeth and Rosario Dawson.

the best scene in the movie, hands down. I made some of the best art I ever made in my life with these people and to come back to the table and do it again, it was fucking beautiful."

A

T ONE POINT during *Empire's* two-day set visit, Smith muses out loud that *Jay & Silent Bob Reboot* might be his last movie. Not because he'd be hanging up the trenchcoat afterwards, but... "I do feel like, oh shit, I'm probably going to die after the movie because it feels like tying up all





these weird loose ends,” he says. “That’s why I’m putting everything into it. I want to make sure I go out making sure I hit every angle.”

Six months on, when we reconnect in early September, Smith is still with us. And allowing himself to look to the future, and further dalliances with his View Askewniverse characters. “If I dropped dead, this would be the one to go out on,” he laughs. “But if I’m still ticking, I’m sure I’ll do something else.”

Buoyed by working again with Jason Lee — acting for the first time in years to return as *Mallrats*’ Brodie Bruce — and the spike of interest following the original’s unexpected referencing in *Captain Marvel*, Smith is talking again of ‘*Mallrats 2*’. And after that, the great white whale of ‘*Clerks III*’, this time with less mass murder. “There’s a story I’d love to do with Dante and Randal where I get to leave them in the best place possible,” he says. And so what if Jeff Anderson, a reluctant actor at the best of times, doesn’t want to do it? Smith has faced seemingly insurmountable obstacles before, and surmounted them. “If we could get Ben into *Reboot*,” he says, “we could do anything.”

And all he had to do to make this work was nearly die. “I don’t want to make heart attacks sexy for anybody,” laughs Smith, “but it could really work out.” Remember, folks — don’t try heart attacks at home. Kevin Smith is a professional. 🍷

JAY & SILENT BOB REBOOT IS IN CINEMAS FROM 29 NOVEMBER



THE JAY-LISTERS

REBOOT IS CRAMMED WITH CELEBRITY CAMEOS. HERE ARE FIVE OF SMITH’S FAVOURITES

MATT DAMON

“I was going to use him as Matt. Then my wife Jennifer said, ‘How come you never think to use him as Loki [from *Dogma*]?’ I said, ‘Cause Loki died.’ She said, ‘Yeah, but it’s a movie.’ I said, ‘Oh, you’re fucking right!’ So we found a church and shot the Loki scene. I love it for what it became.”

CHRIS HEMSWORTH

“He had given an interview where he said, ‘We listened to Kevin Smith on a podcast.’ I said, ‘Chris Hemsworth knew my name? Let’s see if he’ll come do something.’ When he pops up in the movie, people are like, ‘Holy fuck!’ We’ve got a couple of Batmans [Val Kilmer, Ben Affleck] and we’ve got a Thor.”

JUSTIN LONG

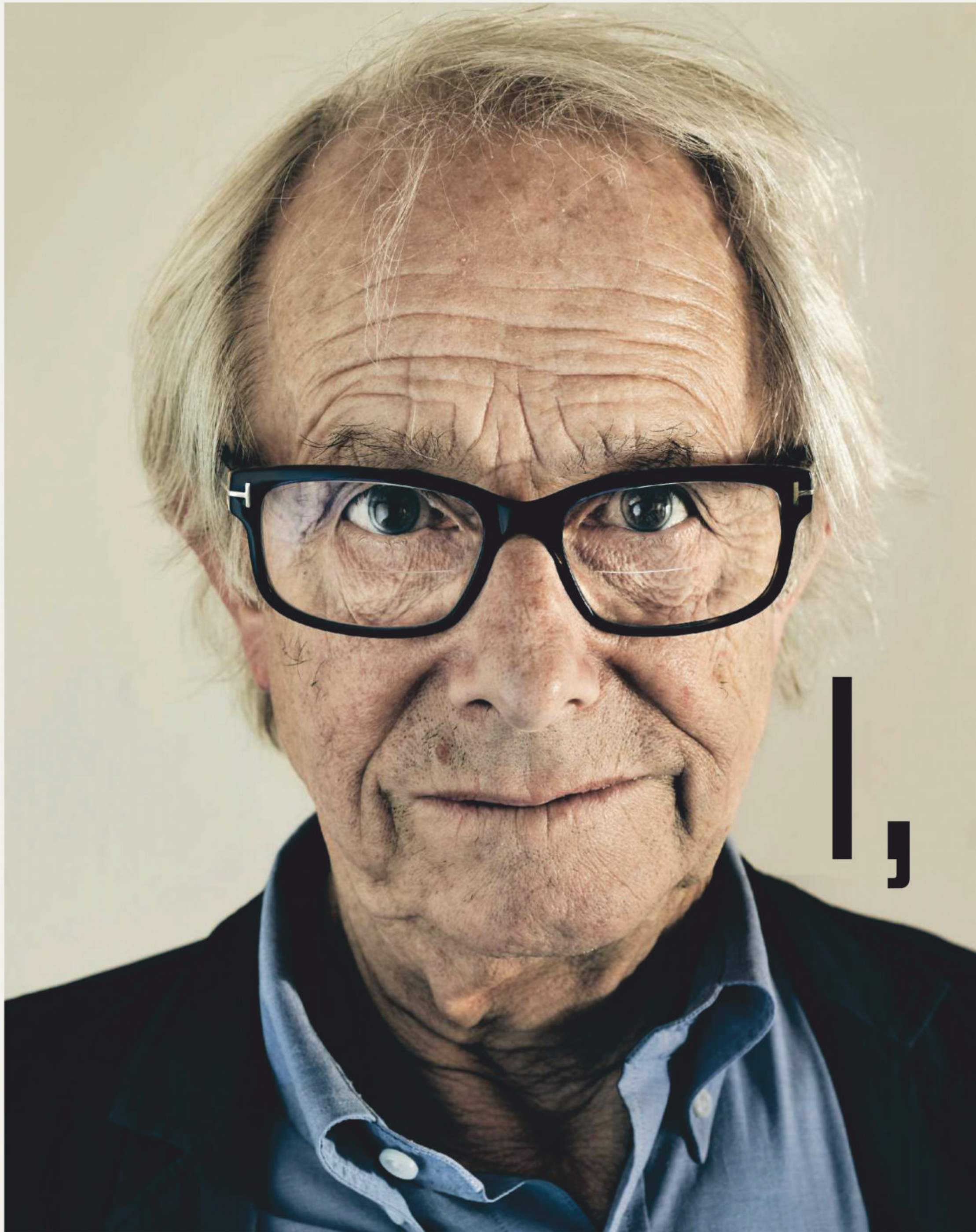
“I had him in *Zack And Miri* and he’s my man in *Tusk* and *Yoga Hosers*, but he was never technically a part of the View Askewniverse. So I loved bringing him in as his *Zack And Miri* character — [filthy-mouthed gay porn star] Brandon St Randy. He’s a weapon of mass destruction, in the best possible way.”

ROSARIO DAWSON

“She doesn’t play Becky [her *Clerks II* character] because that takes my story in a different direction. But she came in, had nearly a half-page of dialogue, and juiced us in that one-page role. Now it’s where I’m like, ‘Fuck, I wish I had nine pages,’ because she’s so electric and fun.”

KEVIN SMITH

“In the original draft, Stan Lee was a big character in the third act. We lost Stan, and there is no Next Stan Lee. So I said, ‘Why don’t I use Kevin Smith as a character?’ So Kevin Smith is the director of the fake Bluntman v Chronic movie.”



Almost 60 years into his career, the director's

urgency is greater than ever. With new film

SORRY WE MISSED YOU **he reflects on a life**

lived on the edges of battle

KEN LOACH

WORDS **TERRI WHITE**

PORTRAITS **SEBASTIAN NEVOLS**

Ken Loach,
photographed
exclusively for
Empire at his
offices in Soho,
London, on
13 August 2019.

K

Ken Loach is full of fire. It's a very Ken Loach brand of fire: quiet, polite, intense. At the age of 83, the director is making, arguably, some of the most incendiary work of his career. Quite a feat, with what an incendiary career it's been so far — from *Cathy Come Home* through *Kes*, *Bread And Roses* and *Jimmy's Hall*, punctuated by a fairly brutal almost-decade in TV, which saw several of his projects shelved under accusations of being too political. Few films since his very early career have captured the burning contemporary issues of society while connecting with audiences at true scale like his current crop. *I, Daniel Blake* in 2016, which digs deep into the DWP, sanctions and food banks. And now *Sorry We Missed You*, which sets out to reveal the true cost of the gig economy. Much has been made of this being Loach's last film, but after spending a couple of hours with the filmmaker in his Soho production office, *Empire* isn't convinced we've seen the last feature from him. After all, there are always more stories to tell. More kindling for the fire.

Last time we met, we talked about *I, Daniel Blake*. When did you start working on *Sorry We Missed You*?

When we saw that *Daniel Blake* had hit a nerve, in the sense that it was a story that hundreds of thousands of people knew about, and yet was not part of the public discourse at all. We became aware that there's another story. Which is the way work has changed. So, instead of it being a way of [having] security and an income, business, and big business in particular, now demands a workforce they can turn on and off like a tap. For drivers, they only get paid when they deliver something. If the person's out, tough — you don't get paid. No sick pay, no holiday pay. All the risks are carried by the worker. So, that shift in power from what we used to call the organised working class, away from them, is the story so many people know about and yet we don't hear. So, we thought maybe we should try and tell it.

From that initial observation, how did Paul Laverty [screenwriter] go about his usual extensive research?

Paul's thought was that's it reflected through the consequences *just* in family life. I mean, there are hundreds of thousands of extreme cases of poverty. And we thought, "Let's not go to the most extreme cases." The relationship's good between the mum and the dad. The dad Ricky [Kris Hitchen] is a good worker, he wants to work. The wife [Debbie Honeywood as Abbie] has got real talents and skill in what she does.



A moment of reflection for Loach as he sits in his Soho HQ.

And they find the pressure on the family becomes intolerable — the whole point of working is that you save, you can spend time with your family, you can bring up your kids. And that simple need is denied because they're out all hours.

And how did you find Kris Hitchen and Debbie Honeywood? Was that Kahleen Crawford [long-time casting director]?

Yeah, I mean, Kahleen's terrific, a very thoughtful, sensitive woman. It's a long process. With the aim being just finding the kind of authenticity that is really quite difficult to find, because film can see the pores of your skin, you know? You can almost read the diet you've had. It sees how your body shapes things. How you use your hands. So, a man who's done manual work all his life will have a different physical presence to somebody who's not. How they use language, because Paul writes a very precise script and that's what you see on the screen. But people just work around it a little bit and find their rhythm within the language. So someone who has a natural rhythm and natural eloquence is very important. I think it's something that's very undervalued in film, language, and how we use it. And how we exchange it. The sensitivity to language is something I miss in many films.

When it comes to film, can you ever really aim to change society?

Well, you can add a voice, you can leave people with a question, you can leave with them a sense of anger, you can leave them with a sense of tragedy — if you're good enough. You can stir the pot up a bit. There's an old American union slogan: "Agitate, educate, organise." Films can agitate a bit. They can educate only a fraction. And they can't organise at all. So you know, we have a function, but it's very limited. And it depends on what people do when they leave the cinema.



***Cathy Come Home* resulted in a spark that what went on to be a bigger change. Do you think that could happen today?**

No. But *Cathy* didn't change the fundamentals. I mean, it changed one bureaucratic rule about husbands being included in temporary accommodation. But it didn't change the essentials, you know, of who owns the land, who controls the building industry, how do we plan for housing. You know, all the big subjects. But it created a big stir, yes.

When was it you first became deeply political? Was it when you were working on BBC anthology series *The Wednesday Play*?

Yes, I think it was in the '60s, when there was a new left developed. So that's when I read the books, really, along with many others of my generation. Listened to people, tried to understand why we were where we were. And I think what's happened since, particularly the rise of Thatcher, the miners' strike, the consequences of that, have absolutely endorsed that basic analysis. You know, what I talked about earlier. The essential conflict in society and the ruthlessness of capital to do everything to have a working class that they can exploit.

What were you exposed to politically growing up? Your dad was working class, right?

Yes, he was an extraordinary man, really, and the older I've gotten the more respect I have for him. All his family were miners in the Warwickshire coalfields. He did his apprenticeship down the mine as an electrician and then he thought they've had enough of being underground and he went to a factory and was an electrician who called himself an electrical engineer. And he was a very bright man. And he quickly progressed, he became a foreman and then he ran the whole maintenance of a big factory. Which meant he went to work seven days a week, six to six, Monday to Friday, six o'clock to one

Top to bottom:
Ray Brooks and Carol White in homelessness drama *Cathy Come Home* (1966); The following year's *Poor Cow*, again starring White; David Bradley in 1969's *Kes*.

o'clock Saturday and Sunday. When he was 11 he passed a scholarship exam to go to the grammar school. And his mother said, "You can't go because I can't afford the uniform." And so he went to the ordinary school and left at 14. And I think he was upset by that for his whole life, really. And when he talked of other kids he'd known, another kid he'd known in particular who had gone and become a headmaster, he said, "I beat him at maths every time." And that's why he was absolutely precise in what he did, and he had great respect for craft. When I got to university, that was a high point of his life because he would have been a lawyer I think, that was in his imagination. And I read law and then left to go into the theatre and he was desperately sad. And I've felt guilty about that ever since.

And how did he feel about what you went on to do?

Well, he saw a bit of it. He died when he was 68 in 1973. He saw *Cathy*, he saw *Kes*. And so I'd done enough. When I joined the BBC that was a mark of respectability.

***Cathy* aired to six million people — can you ever foretell that kind of connection with an audience?**

I think it was more than that, actually. There were only two-and-a-half channels. So both channels, whatever was on, you got a big national audience. You know, people would talk about what had been on television the night before because everybody saw it at once. The medium of using film was very new, it was the first real film we did. We shot for three weeks. We'd only just been allowed to use a 16mm camera, so it was new in that sense as well as having a shocking story. So in a way, with the arrogance of youth — we were all in our very late twenties — we knew we were onto something. It was an exciting time.

And was *Poor Cow* a natural next step?

It was, and I have a lot of regrets about *Poor Cow*. Not about Neil Dunn; I mean, he was a brilliant writer and lovely person to work with, and Carol White did very well and Terence Stamp was very nice. But I found it difficult and felt out of my depth. Half of the crew came from television and half had come from cinema, and they were stuck in a very traditional way of working. So the crew was far too big, it was far too cumbersome, it took far longer than it should. And there were tensions within the crew because of the way the producers set it up. And it was my first film. I mean, my feet weren't touching the ground.

What about *Kes*? It did make a profit at the UK box office at the time, right?

I don't remember. I mean, it was a struggle to get it on.

But it's gone on to be one of the most beloved British films. And it actually seems more hopeful these days, in many respects.

Yeah, it does, I think you're right. Billy, he was marked down as an unskilled or semi-skilled labourer because he was bottom of the class in a selective system. But he had a job, he was part of a community. And there was a collective identity and people supported each other. One of the things to say about *Kes*, it was a big cinematic change as well. And that was a lot [due] to Chris Menges [cinematographer] and the shared enthusiasm for European films, particularly Czech films and how the camera was used and the kind of performances. And the rhythm of the films and the humanity of the films, and the stillness of the films. The use of light and the positioning of the camera, and it not being about putting the camera on your shoulder and chasing the action but standing back, and seeing what's happening. Observe it, allow the audience to read what's in the character's mind rather than just chasing after them in a rush. That simple observation of the way the world really is and not distracting with superfluous camera work, interventionist soundtrack, the respect for people in the film and the solidarity with the characters. It sounds a bit pretentious to talk about it, but that kind of aesthetic shift was there. And that's, in a way, been the guiding principles I've tried to work to ever since. >

How important is it still to give that humanity to your characters and your actors?

It's absolutely essential. One interesting tension is that if you are basically observing, then the consciousness of the film, the film's understanding of the situation, has to emerge in the story and what the audience can read from their story and their situation. And it's not in the consciousness of the characters. Because the characters are often victims. They don't have the global view of their situation. There's been a danger of getting the characters to say things that they wouldn't say just to clarify. And [we should] absolutely do everything *not* to do that because that undermines the truth of the observation. So on the one hand you don't want to give a heightened awareness to characters who wouldn't have it. On the other hand, you've got to allow characters in the film who do see things clearly. Because people in trade unions, people in political organisations *do* do that. You've got to allow those characters who are engaged in the politics to be able to say it. You know, the critic will say, "Oh they're talking too much about politics." Well, surely not. That's why they're there, you know?

Can that lead to claims of bias? I'm thinking about the censorship of some of your TV work in the 1980s?

Well, yes, the accusations of bias come from those who don't want to hear those arguments. It's a straight disagreement.

Do you have to present an equal argument?

There's an interesting metaphor in film, isn't there? A film, that's about light reacting, so about illuminating a piece of celluloid — and a good film is about illuminating and clarifying. Shedding light on a difficult area, on a complicated area, to clarify. It is about clarifying, I think, and presenting the nuances of the discussion.

When you came back to film with *Riff-Raff* after years in TV, the consequences of Thatcherism were very real — was it that that drove you back into film?

I was desperate to get back in. I did one [film] in the mid-'80s, which was a good script and I really made a mess of it. I just thought I'd lost the knack, really. And then the thing is, if you don't work for a time, you lose confidence. It's like a footballer who doesn't play for a season. He goes out on the pitch and, Christ, he's got two left feet. Which is how I felt. I didn't do well and I hold my hand up, it was my fault it didn't do well. Then [producer] David Puttnam rang up. I'll be forever grateful to him, and said did I want to do a film set in Northern Ireland? It got me back on track. I shot that on 35mm and my side of it was quite cumbersome, the actual filmmaking side. And immediately afterwards, I got a chance to do a very inexpensive film for Channel 4. We shot it in five weeks for £800,000 or something, and it was very quick, 16mm. The camera is not on the shoulder all the time, but there was a visual energy to it. It just was set alight. It barely got in the cinemas here because it was Channel 4, sadly. But it was a very happy,



Top to bottom: Loach between takes on 1991's *Riff-Raff*, beside star Robert Carlyle; Dave Johns and Malcolm Shields in the hit *I, Daniel Blake* (2016); New film *Sorry We Missed You*.

brief, quick experience, and great fun to do. And in a way that got me back on track, those two films.

And then you started working with Paul Laverty. Can you talk about the importance of your relationship?

Paul is an extraordinary man, really. We met and got on and we did *Carla's Song*. What you can't learn is the ability to write. To write two lines of dialogue and you know the people saying it — and there's an energy, and a wit, and a truth in the language. Paul certainly has it, and also a real understanding of people and of the way the world is, which is very rare. So since then, he's a good friend, obviously, and we've been lucky enough to work together since. I think if I hadn't had that relationship, I'd have probably packed it in, yeah, a few years ago. But the possibility of doing films together — and Rebecca O'Brien [producer] is the third element in the little group of us — well, certainly Paul and Rebecca play an essential role.

Linked to that, and I guess something that's really important, is that the real credit for the originality of any film really is with the writer.

And the authenticity?

Yes. And in a way, the writer should probably get the end credit, because the film industry is fixated on the director, but actually it's the writer.

Would you work in television again?

Well, my daughter works in television, and one of our sons does direct films, my daughter-in-law does as well, so I've got to be careful what I say, because I think they know more about it than I do now. But it seems to me, and it seems to our generation,

that the freedom that we had just isn't there. The micromanagement. I've even heard of bosses going to people beyond the director. That's outrageous. Everyone having a view. You can't work like that. [Being a] working director in television doesn't attract me now. But absolutely solidarity with those caught in that micromanaged trend.

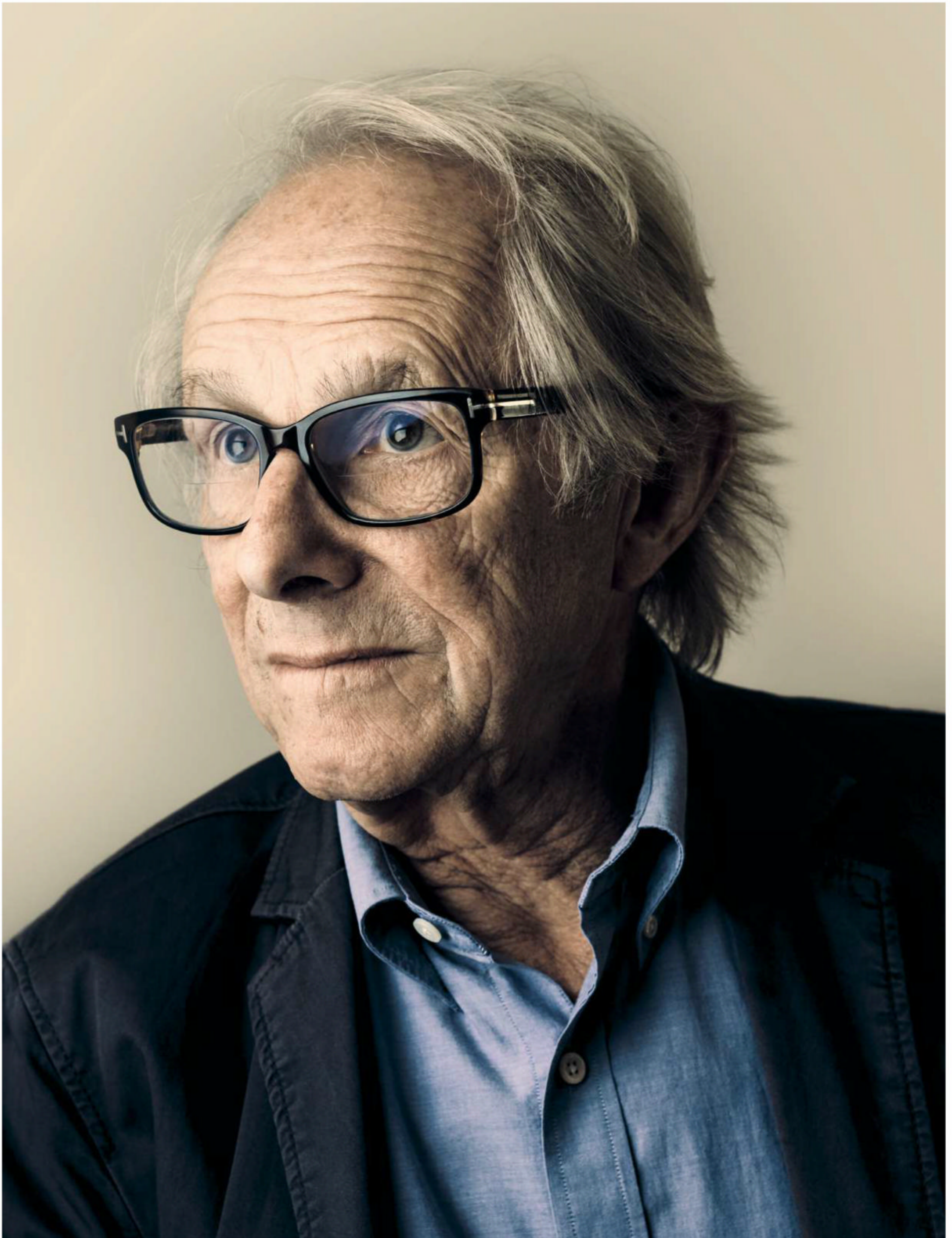
So will there be another film?

I don't know.

Are there more stories to tell?

Yes, too many. Lots. Yeah, lots and lots. Lots. And I think it's very difficult to stop, because having been entirely through the fact of when you start, one or two of us are lucky enough to have a platform. I think Mike [Leigh] is in that situation, and probably Stephen [Frears] is, and one or two others. And we work in a financially very modest way. We're very inexpensive to fund. Proper funding, proper union contracts, everyone is properly cared for, but they're not expensive films. Having that platform, you feel some responsibility to do another one. It's whether I can get round the course or not, I don't know. It's like an old nag being driven round the Grand National saying, "Christ, can I face Becher's Brook again?"

SORRY WE MISSED YOU IS IN CINEMAS FROM 1 NOVEMBER





INVESTIGATOR

MURDER, MYSTERY AND... TOURETTE SYNDROME? **EDWARD NORTON** REFLECTS ON A 20-YEAR JOURNEY AS WRITER-DIRECTOR-STAR TO MAKE **MOTHERLESS BROOKLYN**, A NOIR WITH A UNIQUE TWIST

AS TOLD TO NEV PIERCE



IT'S BEEN NEARLY 20 years between my first film as director and the second, *Motherless Brooklyn*. So I guess the question is: why the rush?

Truth is, I didn't intend for it to be that long. But I knew when I got the rights to Jonathan Lethem's novel that I wasn't going to work on it right away. We did *Fight Club*. I directed *Keeping The Faith*. For four years I just wasn't working on it. Then I wrote about half of it but got blocked.

Finally, the guy running New Line, Toby Emmerich — we'd become friends doing *American History X* — told me, "I want the rest. Write it!" He pushed me and pushed me and I finally finished it. And then Toby was the one who said to me, "You gotta direct this." That was maybe 2012. The funny thing is, we talked about the fact that with Obama getting elected for a second term — this black community organiser as President of the United States — maybe a lot of what this movie's about is fading in the rearview mirror. But Toby was a big believer in it.

It took us five years to get the resources together. New Line wasn't making these kind of

movies. But then Toby became head of Warner Bros. And Donald Trump got elected President. And suddenly the underlying themes in the movie felt white-hot again. Toby said to me, "Now is the time to do it." I really should just tell people I wrote it last year, in response to everything that's been happening. But gestation is important.

I think there's a reason Milos Forman [director of *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* and *Amadeus*] took long breaks between making movies. Paul Thomas Anderson, too. Iñárritu. I think the people who do really good stuff gestate for a long time.

I worked with Milos on *The People Vs. Larry Flynt*. He really taught me about the plasticity of film. I had never seen anybody with such a faith in the process of filming as a way of simply gathering raw material. Not shooting a film to service an edit he already had in his mind, or a storyboard, but really treating it as a process of gathering clay, knowing it was going to be sculpted later. And watching him edit I learned how much that clay could transform from the shape it had seemed to have on the day. That was

eye-opening to me, because it made me realise you needed to give the script and performances room to reveal themselves in ways you didn't necessarily presuppose.

On this film Toby Emmerich correctly predicted that the necessity of me directing was partly to be able to sculpt my own performance with this very tricky role. I didn't have to perfect the performance on the day. I could do it at different levels — play around a lot more freely knowing it was only me who would determine the right balance and arc later. Given our tight schedule this was important, because I was able to move faster and not be so hung up on 'the right delivery'.

A LONG TIME ago I asked David Fincher, "What's your most important advice to a director?" And he said, in his typically indelicate way, "You can only have one crybaby on a movie. Only one person who needs you holding their hand a lot. Figure out



who's worth it and make sure they're the only one." But on this one I realised, "I can't actually have *any* needy actors. I can't have anyone in the cast who isn't such a tradecraft pro that they are easily capable of dealing with me banging around like a madman."

I cast everybody in the movie from my core, New York theatrical-based roster, with the exception of Gugu Mbatha-Raw. Probably the times I felt the most anxiety were with Gugu, because of the intimacy of some of those scenes. To be trying to adjust them as a writer and director while also being in it with her was very difficult — I constantly felt the impulse to say, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." But she's such a stone-cold, RADA-trained, unflappable pro! Her ability to adjust on the fly and stay within the emotion despite all my externalising distraction was just fucking phenomenal. Phenomenal. As was Willem Dafoe and Bobby Cannavale, Alec Baldwin. But those are people I've known a long, long time and have an easy rapport with. Gugu was like my MVP in terms of placing her faith in me and just infinite patience with the distraction

entailed in me wearing both hats.

And I owe a lot to Bruce Willis, who helped me get the movie made by agreeing to do it for almost nothing. The story really hinges on what happens to his character and the emotional impact that has on my character, Lionel Essrog. The whole movie doesn't play if you don't buy that. It needed to be someone who the audience brings an existing affection for. But it wasn't just because Bruce is who he is. His character is a figure of mystery, he's enigmatic, he's the coolest guy in the room, the guy with all the angles. He's a mentor for Lionel, like an older brother to him. And Bruce brings that almost intrinsically. I love it when you're getting an actor in that zone that's their bread and butter.

Technically my anchor was Dick Pope, the cinematographer. I worked with Dick on *The Illusionist* and I think a lot of what people love about that movie is down to him. If you look at his work on that and with Mike Leigh on *Vera Drake*, *Topsy-Turvy*, *Mr. Turner*... It's immersive, it's not self-consciously period, it's lived-in. You're in an environment of depth and grit and

without some bullshit patina or matte finish that indicates insistently that you're in a different era. I knew he would be the right person to shoot this.

We looked at Edward Hopper paintings as a reference point. And Vivian Maier photographs. There are homages to about six or seven Maier photographs specifically in the film. But Hopper had a big effect on us. We talked a lot about the loneliness that's in Hopper's urban tableaux. Like when Willem Dafoe and Alec Baldwin meet in the night under an awning in the spill of the light — we tap-danced like crazy to get the city to shut down all the lights along Fifth Avenue, to create enough darkness to create that shaft of light.

There's a great tradition of films — *Forrest Gump*, *Rain Man*, *A Beautiful Mind*, *Good Will Hunting* — that function because they're about an underdog. They're about a hero who's got some kind of an affliction that makes them unique. And the audience roots for them not despite the affliction but because of it. What was in my mind was this idea that to be pulled through a purposefully murky and convoluted story, you have to be hooked into a character.

I watched *Forrest Gump* again about a year ago. It's a much more politically toothy film than you remember. It's actually quite sardonic and it has some bitterness in it. It's dark. It's written by Eric Roth and he's got a great, incisive sensibility. But you don't really remember the plot of that film — you're carried along by the poignancy of this character and humour of this guy navigating the world in his condition. And I think that's a very successful way to pull people through something dense. *Chinatown* does that, but not through an afflicted character. It just does it 'cause Jack Nicholson is so fucking cool that you're with it. You have no fucking idea what's going on in *Chinatown* eight-tenths of the way through. I defy anybody who says they understand what's going on in that movie until maybe the last 20 minutes. And even still people come away really with an essential sense of it.



You come away with an essential sense of the sin of a city.

It's not coincidental to me that *Chinatown* hits right as the Vietnam War is ending and people are questioning, "Are we really what we say we are?" And you get this story that under the sunny American Dream idea of Los Angeles is theft and incest. The place that was marketed as the land of the American Dream is in fact all built on a crime. My feeling was that New York has not only deep, vast shadowy criminality within its modern history, but also the stain of racism actually baked into its infrastructure. I felt like for all the films that have been made about New York, there hadn't really been a real hard look at what I think is the great, hidden, dark truth of the second half of the 20th century in New York, which is that it was run by a Darth Vader. It wasn't La Guardia. It wasn't Nelson Rockefeller. It wasn't true to any of the signposts of a democratic society. It was run — full stop — by an imperial Caesar who was a racist and who baked racism into the infrastructure of the city. He destroyed much of what was most beautiful about the old city, ruined it in ways that it can't, in some ways, recover from. But people don't talk about it. Right in the middle of post-war Pax Americana the biggest city in America was being run by an anti-democratic, authoritarian bully: Robert Moses.

Our villain in *Motherless Brooklyn* is based on him and played by Alec Baldwin. And you can say, well, there are echoes of Trump or whatever. But the truth is, Robert Moses was a genius and Trump is a moron. Trump is a clown. Robert Moses was a once-in-a-century genius. But a terrible person. One of the reasons Alec's so great is that there's a seductiveness to his argument: that you have to have the capacity to look forward unsentimentally to get things that are important done in the chaos of a society. That kind of abandonment of a sense of obligation or responsibility, the idea that the rules have fallen



away from you, is a timeless sort of threat. People amassing power who don't have a sense of humanistic responsibility to other people are dangerous as fuck. And it's an eternal return.

Going back to Milos, I used to ask him why he was so constantly interested in stories about people pushing back against oppressive authority. Well, Milos had lived through the Nazis. He lived through totalitarian Communism. And his view was, "You're not gonna win. These things won't go away. But if you cease the defiance, they will take more than half the field." He really believed it was a relentless, constant fight to keep the omnipresent forces of this kind of bullying desire for control and power at bay.

LIONEL ESSROG IS pretty hard-boiled in the sense that, as he says, he can't see past his own daily battles. We talked about the fact that even though people don't have as extreme a condition as Lionel, when you're admitted into the inner life of a person and he says, "Hey, the first thing to know is I'm pretty fucked up," your affinity begins. Because whether or not they have Tourette syndrome, most people feel the same. The truth is most people down inside their inner core think, "I am not totally understood. There's a 'me' that nobody else knows. And I'm doing battle in the world. I have to fight my way through life."

Whether they have Tourette syndrome or not, I think he speaks to that part of people that feels they're not seen for everything that they are. And the truth is, people don't have a lot of bandwidth to fight for the bigger things. They're like, "Life is fucking hard." When Thom Yorke wrote this song, 'Daily Battles', for us, it flattened me. When I heard the lyric I teared up and went back in and wrote the line into the scene where Gugu's character says, "We've all got our daily battles, right?" Like, the point is he's in the car with a black woman in 1950s New York and he's lamenting his condition. And she's sort of like, "Hello?!" She's out there on the barricades. And he doesn't really get to be with her unless he is

willing to get off the fence.

I think most people know there's a lot of bad shit going on, but it's hard to find the room in their own daily struggles to add that to their list of what they're gonna deal with.

I feel like hopefully the movie's a fun adventure and takes people deeper than they expect at the start. And when noir works it's not about people following every twist of the convoluted plot. It's whether they come away with an essential sense that things aren't what we thought they were. Noir, in the most high-minded sense, is about revealing the shadow. There's a lot of dark shit going on and we're going to look at it. And I think — getting highfalutin — that's when maybe films have an actual role to play in making sure people don't swallow the party line wholesale.

Has my relationship to acting shifted? Some, yes. When a piece is really good and worthy like *Birdman* or *Fight Club*, I am so happy to be in the ensemble that's coming together around someone else's big idea. To give everything you've got in the service of whatever it is a great director is chasing is wonderful. But sometimes there's a character or a story and you're like: this one's mine. Mine to construct and incarnate and make it the way I want it. And fight the fight to have it stay as close to the thing that was in my head as I can make it. There's a pretty deep satisfaction in getting through that. And there are things that come to you from taking that on that are a joy. Having Thom write a song, Daniel Pemberton the score, [virtuoso jazz trumpeter] Wynton Marsalis do an arrangement, having Dick Pope do his thing. And you're there going, "How did I get to dance with this kind of talent?" That's a great feeling. That gets into some sort of macro creative experience that's gotten beyond acting. It's taken you up into the realm of being some kind of a curator of an idea that inspires people to do all kinds of great work. And you're there to marshal it all and pull it together. That's pretty thrilling. 🍷

MOTHERLESS BROOKLYN IS IN CINEMAS FROM
22 NOVEMBER





Murder, He Wrote

RIAN JOHNSON'S NEW MOVIE, **Knives Out**, IS A LOVE LETTER TO — AND JOHNSONIAN DECONSTRUCTION OF — A GENRE HE'S LOVED ALL HIS LIFE: THE MURDER MYSTERY. HERE, HE TELLS US HOW HE DUNNIT

WORDS CHRIS HEWITT



HERE ARE CERTAIN things you need when making a murder mystery. A murder, ideally. A mystery, preferably. But that's not all. As Rian Johnson found when he was writing and directing his latest movie, *Knives Out*, there are staples of a genre that stretches all the way back to the 1800s that must be incorporated; that

help set a whodunnit apart from any other type of detective fiction. "When people say what's a good whodunnit and start listing stuff, I'm like, 'That's more of a procedural, that's more of a detective noir,'" says Johnson. "Whodunnit to me is much more specific than that. It's a tricky genre to do, cinematically, because it has that basic weakness Hitchcock always talked about, where the whole thing hinges on one big surprise at the end. I came into it from a genre-tinkerer's point of view. How do you approach the plot mechanics of a whodunnit in a way that can make it fresh and still give you all the pleasures of a good whodunnit?"

For anyone who's seen *Brick*, Johnson's spin on a film noir, or *Looper*, his time-travel twist, it won't come as a surprise to learn that *Knives Out* both respectfully nods to, and then pulls the rug out from under, the whodunnit. We asked Johnson to tell us how he tinkered under the genre's hood.

THE VICTIM

Knives Out hinges on one big question: who killed octogenarian Harlan Thrombey, and why? And is that technically two questions? We may never know the answer to that last one, but we can absolutely, definitively reveal right here, right now, that Rian Johnson killed Harlan Thrombey, officer. And he had a swell time doing so.

"I really had been thinking about it for the past ten years," admits Johnson. And the evidence can be found, not on a wall chart in his office, liberally festooned with red string, but in a series of Moleskine notebooks. It's in those that Johnson cooked up Harlan Thrombey's demise, from the motive to the murder weapon and the identity of the murderer, or murderers. "I happen to have a brain that quite enjoys that puzzle-box aspect of it," he says. "Keeping track of all the threads and timelines and everything, for me that's fun. But every time on set an actor would come over to me, and I could tell they had a question, my heart would stop a little because I was terrified they would unravel the entire plot with the one thing I hadn't thought of." That it didn't happen, that nobody could tug at a loose thread, is perhaps disquieting. There's a chance that Rian Johnson has cooked up the perfect murder.

Although the movie begins after Thrombey's end, the fact that he's played by Christopher



Right, top to bottom: *Knives Out* director Rian Johnson on set; The Thrombey family meet with their lawyer.

Plummer should tip off even the Watsons in the audience that he won't spend the entire running time as a corpse. And sure enough, through flashbacks, Johnson begins to shed some light on this mysterious figure. And here are the first signs of his tinkering. "Most often in mysteries, the person who's going to get killed is sort of the bad guy for the first third of it, or doesn't have that much to do in terms of the mechanics of what makes the story work," he says. "That's not necessarily the case with this one."

As we meet Thrombey in flashbacks, Johnson paints the picture of a wise, often warmhearted old man, who's made his family very rich indeed through his successful career as a murder-mystery author. "I thought it would be quite fun to give it a slight meta layer," laughs Johnson. "That's something that has a rich and deep tradition in whodunnits."

That choice also allowed the director to have fun with another genre constant — the spooky old mansion, replete with tricked-out corridors,





The assembled gang gather for the final reveal. **Below:** Thrombey's long-time nurse, Marta (Ana de Armas).

So, we have Jamie Lee Curtis as Harlan's hard-nosed daughter, Linda ("She has a strength, a control, an emotional connection to her father"), Michael Shannon playing against type as Harlan's weak-willed son, Walt ("Seeing him play a character who's a little more subservient is the opposite of what you think of when you think of Michael Shannon"), and Jaeden Martell as Jacob Thrombey, Harlan's grandson who, not to put too fine a point on it, is something of a budding Nazi and internet troll extraordinaire. Which, Johnson claims, has nothing to do with his experiences at the hands of whingeing fanbabies after the release of his last movie, *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*. "Total coincidence," he says with an admirably straight face. "That's much more from being someone who lives in 2019 and is on the internet. It's not unique to my experience. If Agatha Christie were writing today, she'd have a character who's an internet troll. It's about using this form to create a caricature of today. Also, it's quite fun to write."

There, we suspect, is largely the rub with Martell's character; it's hard not to sense Johnson's glee as he skewers the type of incel edgelord who went after him with barely disguised, grammatically inept relish. And in rounding up the rest of his unusual suspects, most of whom are venal and vile, sniping and snarling at each other in an attempt to avoid blame, interested only in self-advancement, self-interest and the old man's dough, he saw a chance to say something about the state of the world. Or, specifically, modern America. "I think any time you sit down to write something you better have something on your mind, something that you're, for lack of a better way of saying, a little angry about," says Johnson.

As a student of the genre, he knows that this isn't new. "Agatha Christie never wrote

fake doors and the like. "*Sleuth*, for me, was a big touchstone for that," says Johnson of his murder house, which was mostly played by a real house just outside of Boston. "*Clue*, a little bit. Or *Murder By Death*. It's kind of the classic murder-mystery mansion. In addition to all the fun, there has to be a slightly spooky element, a sense of dread that is lightly laced all through it." It has to be the sort of grand, gothic, slightly grim mansion that has a library where, say, a master detective can gather a large group of suspects for a grand unveiling. Speaking of which...

THE SUSPECTS

If the question is, "Who killed Harlan Thrombey?", then the answer lies in the coterie of cads that Johnson meticulously assembles, virtually all of them related to Thrombey, and virtually all of them equipped with a solid reason to help the old man shuffle off this mortal coil. "That's something murder mysteries do quite well," says Johnson. "Every single person has a different motive."





The Thrombey family (with Linda, played by Jamie Lee Curtis, left) celebrate the 85th birthday of patriarch Harlan (Christopher Plummer, centre).

social-issue books, but she was writing in this kind of caricatured way about British society." Not for nothing, he says, was Poirot a foreigner, an immigrant, having to battle negative preconceptions of his Belgian ways. Columbo, also an influence on *Knives Out*, was something of a class warrior, taking down the rich and entitled every week. "This isn't a message movie," adds Johnson, "but the idea of using this very entertaining form to present you with a slightly inflated caricature that you can hopefully take something from, the idea of doing that for America today is a big part of the appeal for me."

Accordingly, *Knives Out* has more on its mind than who/where/why/when/how/whatdunnit. Although it's been in Johnson's head, and notebooks, for a decade, he only started to write it in January 2018, and it's clearly a movie about Trump's America. There are themes of racism, the treatment of immigrants, entitlement, greed, about the haves, the have nots and the *really* have nots. "It all happened mind-spinningly fast," says Johnson. "That was a really nice thing, so I could take the structure I'd spent all this time working on and put all this stuff in there that felt very present and modern and today."

It also allowed him to fulfil a dream he'd had ever since he fell in love with classic Peter-Ustinov-Is-Hercule-Poirot movies such as *Evil Under The Sun* or *Death On The Nile* as a kid. He didn't intend to stuff *Knives Out* with wall-to-wall A-listers — it just kinda happened. "I would have thought it was absurd to get these people in the cast," he laughs. "It's wonderful to have a big cast of movie stars, because that's part of the pleasure we're going for." In addition to the aforementioned actors, Johnson also attracted Ana de Armas as Harlan Thrombey's nurse ("A very important character that has some very complicated things to do throughout the story"), Toni Collette as a self-satisfied hanger-on of sorts, and Chris Evans — Captain America himself — as Harlan's grandson, the wonderfully named Ransom Drysdale, a role which requires Evans to go from playing America's ass to America's asshole. "It's very fun writing a character where you can dig into the more

obnoxious elements of their personality," admits Johnson. The moment in the movie's first trailer where Ransom invites several members of his family to "eat shit" nearly stopped the internet in its tracks. "I think the internet is made of tougher stuff," laughs Johnson. "I wasn't thinking about Ransom in terms of Captain America saying this stuff. I was excited to see Chris dig into this."

In any other movie, Ransom would be the standout role, the showiest part, the shiniest jewel in a collection where every piece has been polished to within an inch of its life. In *Knives Out*, though, Ransom and the rest of the suspects must defer to one man: Benoit Blanc. Rian Johnson's master detective.

THE DETECTIVE

If the question is, "Who killed Harlan Thrombey?", then Johnson needed to create a character worthy of answering it. And if it hasn't become abundantly clear already, he's a man who knows his whodunnit onions. Or whodunnions, if you will. So, when he sat down to create a master detective who could crack the Thrombey case wide open, he did so all too aware of the ghosts of detectives past peering over his shoulder: the Marples, the Poirots, the Columbos, the Lord Peter Wimseys, the Dr Fells.

"I kinda drove myself nuts a little bit when I was coming up with this guy," he admits. "I knew the function I needed him to have, I knew how the whole thing was going to play, but who he was was, honestly, very daunting." Initially, Johnson wanted the character to have something that set him apart visually, like Poirot's moustache, or Columbo's cheap raincoat and green cigars. "What's his tic? What's his weird thing? That's the wrong way to approach any character," he says.

Eventually, he decided upon three things. One, his detective would be "Southern, in the midst of all these New England WASPs". Two, he would be called Benoit Blanc, first name a tribute to the guy who's been forlornly trying to teach Johnson French for the last *dix ans*, last





Left, top to bottom: Playboy Ransom Drysdale (Chris Evans); Detective Blanc (Daniel Craig) with Marta; The family lawyer Alan Stevens (Frank Oz) and Sally (Kerry Frances); Blank with Lt. Elliott (LaKeith Stanfield). **Above:** Harlan hands Linda a letter.

name... well, "It just rolled off the tongue." But it might also have been Johnson's subconscious telling him something. Because the third thing Johnson decided is that the character would only start to take shape when he found the right actor to fill in the Blanc. "I didn't write it with anyone specifically in mind," he says. "I've learned not to do that because you just inevitably get your heart broken when you do it. I try to write for the character, and when we get an actor in there we're going to figure out what his trenchcoat is, so to speak."

So he wrote for the character, and when he was done, Johnson figured that the best person to play Benoit Blanc was, of all people, James Bond. Or Daniel Craig, to be more specific. "I love Daniel as Bond, and had seen some of the stage work he had done, and had seen the range he had, and how funny he could be. But we didn't think he was available."

He wasn't. He was committed to *No Time To Die*. But then that film switched directors, pushed back production, and suddenly Craig had a window in his schedule. A window large enough to allow him to begin work on a character so striking and eccentric that one character dubs him "CSI: KFC". "It didn't become a person until Daniel got in there," says Johnson. "He's a very collaborative actor. We talked about the accent. I sent him some recordings of Shelby Foote, the historian, speaking, Daniel would record him doing stuff and send it back to me. But I didn't know how big a swing he would take with it all."

The result is an extremely funny character, whether it's unsettling the Thrombeys during interrogations by playing a single note on a piano, or bopping along to songs on his iPod. "He has a speech about the hole in a doughnut, and I remember sitting behind the monitor with a massive smile on my face, thinking, 'Okay,

I think we have a movie,'" recalls Johnson. He's unorthodox, eccentric, and should he be fortunate enough to assemble all the key players in the library for a grand recounting of the whole story, you can be sure that it won't be your average common-or-garden murderer unveiling. "A certain version of that happens here," admits Johnson. "For me, it scratches that itch. I don't love watching my movies, but that chunk of this movie I will be able to sit down for any time, just seeing Daniel go to town."

There are elements of great detectives prior in Benoit Blanc. "I think the Southern accent makes everyone underestimate him a bit," says Johnson. "He can be very gentle, so you forget how sharp he is." That's pure Columbo. In other instances — his emotional connection to one of the chief suspects, for instance — Johnson hearkened back to classic Christie. "With Poirot, you'll see a melancholy connection he sometimes makes to the characters, and a sadness at the thing that's unravelling. There are moments in this where Daniel makes a connection that's extremely effective."

It's that emotional connection that Johnson is striving for with *Knives Out*, all too aware that it could, if not careful, become a stylistic exercise in box-ticking. So there are unexpected wrinkles throughout. Red herrings all over the shop. It's not always the film you might expect. "The best whodunnits figure out ways of keeping you hooked throughout," he says. "I wanted to have my cake and eat it too, with all the pleasures of a whodunnit, but a dramatic structure a little closer to a Hitchcock thriller." It's an admirable ambition. And if you can't put your trust in the man who killed Harlan Thrombey, who can you trust?

KNIVES OUT IS IN CINEMAS FROM 29 NOVEMBER

Good Chris, Bad Chris

CHRIS EVANS CAN PLAY EVERYTHING FROM NICE TO NASTY. HERE ARE FOUR ROLES THAT SHOWCASE HIS RANGE — WHERE HIS *KNIVES OUT* JERK FITS, ONLY TIME WILL TELL



MR NICE GUY
STEVE ROGERS
(THE INFINITY
SAGA, 2011-'19)

From *The First Avenger* to *Endgame*, the likeable righteousness of the man better known as 'Cap' never stopped shining through — even when he went all rogue and anti-UN in *Civil War*. This was the hero who upbraided Tony Stark for swearing in *Age Of Ultron* ("Language!"), and turned out to be so pure of heart, he was even deemed worthy to wield the mighty magic mallet Mjolnir.



WHAT A DICK
LUCAS LEE
(SCOTT PILGRIM VS.
THE WORLD, 2010)

The leather-jacketed pro skateboarder-turned-star of such blockbusters as *You Just Don't Exist* is the most amiable man in Hollywood. After all the other men. Including Tommy Lee Jones. "You really think you can stand a chance against an A-lister, bro?" he sneers at our hero, Scott (Michael Cera)... Before leaving his stunt team to kick the crap out of the kid while he slinks off to check his phone.



**ALRIGHT ONCE
YOU GET TO
KNOW HIM**
CURTIS EVERETT
(SNOWPIERCER, 2013)

Tough times require tough heroes, and it's hard to imagine tougher times than those suffered by the repressed have-nots in the rear carriages of the titular, dystopian train of Bong Joon-ho's *Snowpiercer*. Grizzly bearded Curtis is a man on a bloody, class-war mission, but while he's on the side of the angels, he's not without his demons. Human-flesh-eating demons.



JUST THE WORST
MR FREEZY
(THE ICEMAN, 2012)

"I thought, 'What can I do that's just the opposite of Captain America?'" Evans once asked himself. The answer was to take a role in Ariel Vromen's true-life thriller as Mr Freezy, a grotty, greasy-haired Mob hitman who drives an ice-cream truck, where he stores the remains of his victims in the freeze box — one of whom, he reveals, he killed by force-feeding her a puffer fish. Chilling.

DAN JOLIN

“FIRE ME.

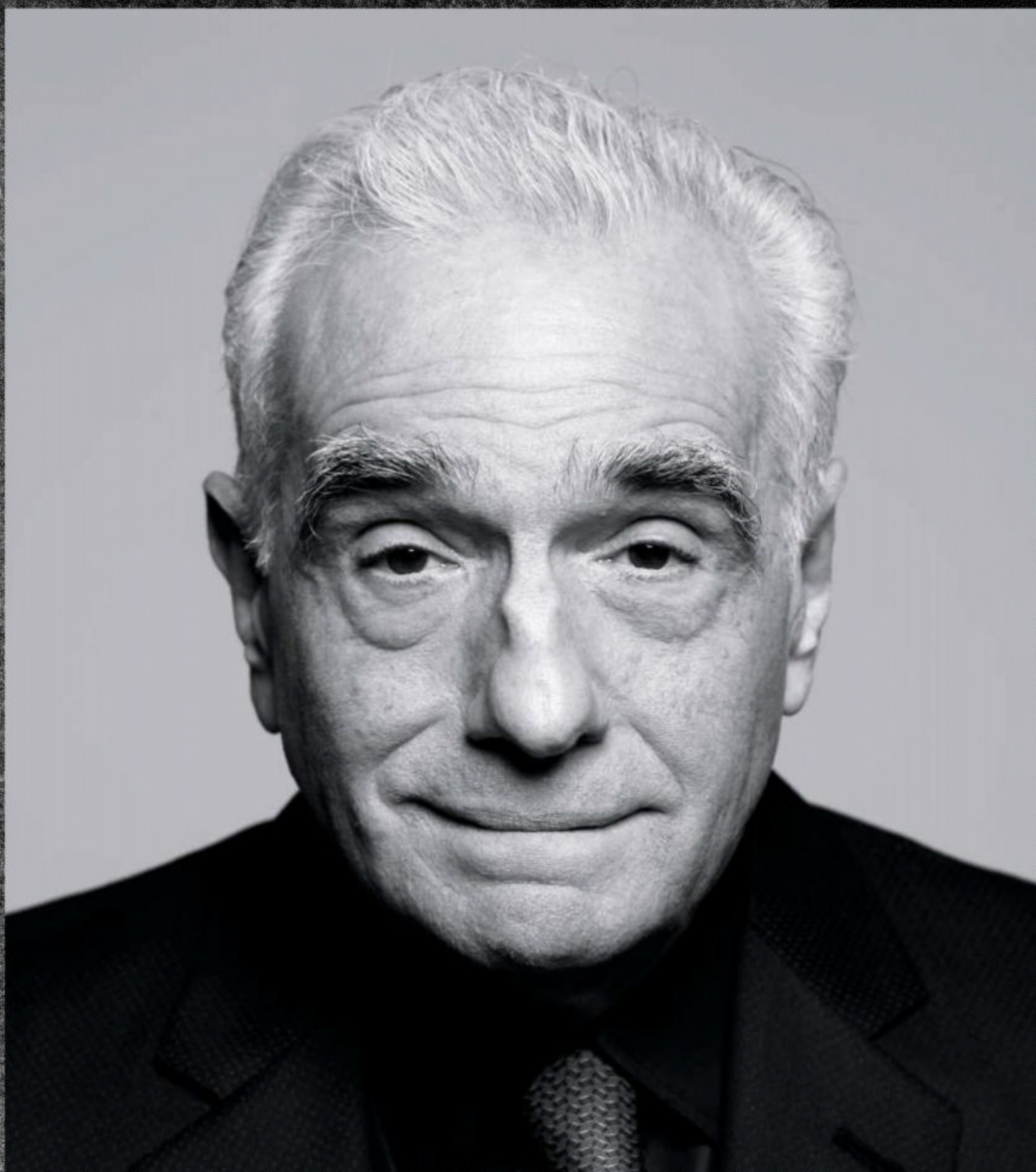
THERE'S NO FORCE ON EARTH THAT CAN STOP **MARTIN SCORSESE** MAKING MOVIES.
ON THE CUSP OF **THE IRISHMAN**, HIS MOST AMBITIOUS ONE YET, *EMPIRE* HEADS TO NEW YORK
FOR A WORLD-EXCLUSIVE SIT-DOWN WITH THE MAESTRO WHO REFUSES TO COMPROMISE

SHOOT ME.

WORDS **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

PORTRAITS **BRIGITTE LACOMBE**

KILL ME.”



Martin Scorsese,
photographed
exclusively
for *Empire* in
New York on
2 April 2019.

“LOCK THE DOORS.
DON'T ANSWER
THE PHONE.
START FROM
SCENE ONE.”

It was late 2005, and Martin Scorsese had just decided to go rogue. His new film, *The Departed*, had wrapped after a lengthy, arduous shoot, and Scorsese was being hounded by Warner Bros. executives to unveil a cut. So the filmmaker and his editor, Thelma Schoonmaker, sat down in their private screening room, part of his office complex high up in the Directors Guild building on New York's 57th Street, to find out where they were at. The Boston-set crime drama unspooled in full. Then Scorsese turned to Schoonmaker and told her they were starting the whole thing from scratch.

“For six weeks, there were literally people out there knocking on doors,” the director recalls now. “We wouldn't answer it. They were really mad at us. They really were angry. I said, ‘Fire me, shoot me, kill me — we're gonna wrestle this thing to the ground.’”

Fourteen years on, Scorsese has welcomed *Empire* to Sikelia Productions, the place that was previously a siege-ground, for a lengthy sit-down chat. His HQ is, as one might expect, a hushed haven and a serene shrine to cinema. Sir Christopher Frayling's new book on *Once Upon A Time In The West* has just been couriered over, ready to join the many other dense tomes filling the shelves (yes, Scorsese owns *Scorsese On Scorsese*). Antique Sicilian puppet knights dangle from hooks. And many, many immaculately framed film posters line the walls. But it's perhaps telling that the two on the wall directly behind his desk — *Sunset Boulevard* and *The Bad And The Beautiful* — are both tales about the dark side of Hollywood, tales which demonstrate that filmmaking is not a world for the faint-hearted.

Over the years, Scorsese has garnered much success and even more acclaim. *The Departed*, of course, went on to finally win him that long-deserved Oscar. But none of it has come easy. In pulling off one hugely ambitious, seemingly uncommercial victory after another, he's had to make hard decisions and hold his nerve. No matter how many people were knocking on his door.



IN HIS FORMATIVE YEARS, SCORSESE wasn't quite so tough. Born in the relative tranquility of Flushing, Queens, at the age of eight he suddenly found himself engulfed in



the madness of Manhattan's Little Italy when his parents, experiencing “problems with the landlord”, moved back to their old neighbourhood. “It was very difficult for them, and also for me, because I had been a kid with terrible asthma who was taken care of all the time, and then suddenly thrown into hanging out with the Dead End Kids,” he remembers. “Playing with garbage pails and jumping over the poor alcoholics who were dying in the street. Chasing rats — that was big.”

It was a shock to his system. ‘Devil's Mile’ (the Bowery) lay east, ‘Murder Mile’ (Mulberry Street) lay west — neither sounds particularly inviting for a stroll. Crime was rife, not least from the underworld figures who ruled the streets. “The streets were anarchic: there was control but almost like a medieval kind,”

Scorsese says. “If you knew to behave respectfully to certain people, it was cool. If not, there were problems. You behaved within those parameters, unless you were some kid who thought he could take on the world, who usually ended up dead.”

Young Marty had two favourite spots, both well away from the chaos. One was the local cathedral, St. Patrick's: “I lived in there. It was peaceful and it made sense.” The other was the fire escape of his family's third-floor apartment at 253 Elizabeth Street. He would sit there for days on end, looking down, following the most interesting people and directing movies in his head. “I saw so many things from that fire escape,” Scorsese says, wistfully. “So much imagery, so many incredible spectacles. Laughter, fights breaking out, the butcher



running out with a bat. You could just pan up and down the street.”

All this observing made him an astute student of human behaviour, but also a frustrated one. He'd mimic his favourite actors in the mirror, but in reality he couldn't even run, thanks to his asthma, let alone perform the kind of heroics he loved watching in movie theatres. Finally, though, he found a creative outlet: filmmaking. And in his breakthrough third picture, 1973's *Mean Streets*, set on his home turf, all that pent-up energy came bursting out. “There were a lot of things I couldn't say or do that expressed themselves in that film,” he confirms.

At the time, Pauline Kael called *Mean Streets* “a triumph of personal filmmaking”, with “a high-charged emotional range that is dizzyingly sensual”. Watching it now still feels like being



Clockwise from left: Robert De Niro and Martin Scorsese on set of *Taxi Driver* (1976); Making *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974); 1980's *Raging Bull*; With Liza Minnelli on *New York, New York* (1977); 1986's pool sequel *The Color Of Money*.

jolted with electric current. Scorsese takes us on a tour of a place where comedy and horror jostle side by side, his camera diving into edgy pool halls and sordid bars, navigating the underworld with a confidence the director never had before he picked up a camera.

In *Taxi Driver*, a few years on, his home city looks even more hellish. Scorsese denies that this was by design. “For me that was normal in New York,” he insists. “We didn't think of it as a terrible place. When President Ford said to the city, ‘Drop dead,’ or whatever, we were kind of shocked. The city was falling apart, but it was

falling apart in the late '50s and all through the '60s. It's like what's happening now, where new norms are being formed in terms of democratic process here in America. It's a slow erosion, and you live with it. When a city starts to erode, that's on many different levels. You could see it in *The French Connection*. You could see it in *Taxi Driver*. Those two films, I think, give a real sense of what it was like. You can almost smell it through the screen.”

No filmmaker and city are more synonymous than Scorsese and New York. His new movie, *The Irishman*, will return to the Copacabana Club, home of *GoodFellas*' iconic Steadicam shot, for a scene involving insult comic Don Rickles (played by actor/comedian Jim Norton). Yet he sounds melancholy when he considers what the city has become. “I must admit it's safer, and that's good. I don't miss the way 42nd Street was when we shot *Taxi Driver* — it was horrible,” he says. “However, it's just as horrible now. Only you can bring the kids. Let them enjoy the mind-eviscerating horror!”



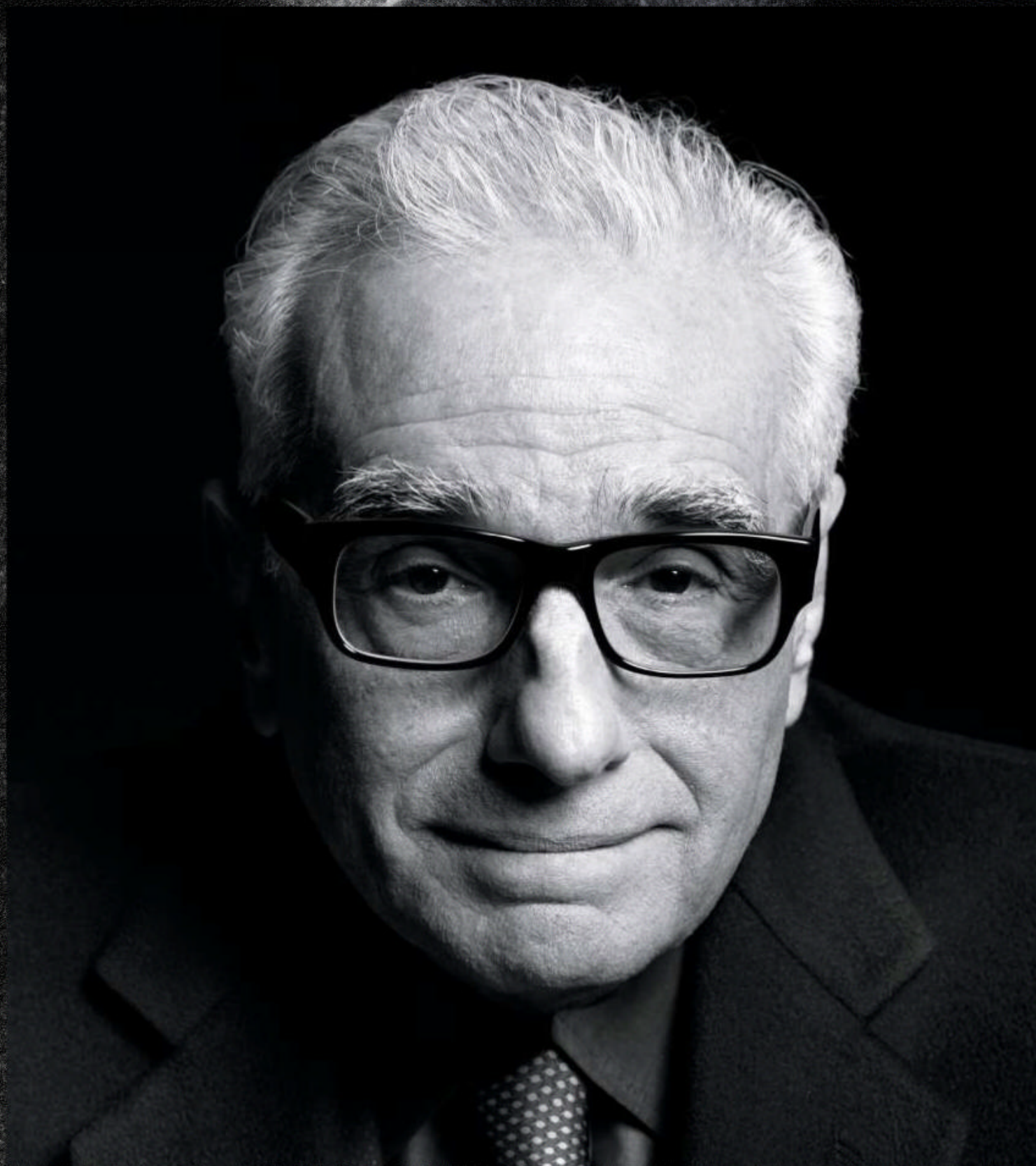
THE 1970s WAS THE PERFECT CLIMATE for Scorsese's ascent. The type of film he liked to make — personal, emotionally raw, audaciously original — was in vogue, with studios willing to finance experimental endeavours. Commercial success was an afterthought. “We didn't care,” Scorsese states. “I don't mean to be arrogant, but I never thought of that. I knew that it wouldn't translate for everybody. But there'll be some people in the audience who'll say, ‘Yeah, that's me.’ And maybe it'll make your life a little richer.”

For a while he could do no wrong. He followed *Mean Streets* with a female-led drama, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, which won star Ellen Burstyn an Oscar. *Taxi Driver* picked up the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1976. Then, at the tail end of the decade, he decided to make a modern spin on the MGM musical *New York, New York*. And his world came tumbling down.

Despite featuring another collaboration with Robert De Niro, and allowing Scorsese to pay homage to the Golden Age of Hollywood, the film was a disaster, with an out-of-control shoot and poor box office. The director became depressed, exhausted and hooked on cocaine, ultimately collapsing and nearly dying from massive internal bleeding.

It seemed he had flamed out. But De Niro convinced him to make one more film: *Raging Bull*, a dark psychodrama about a boxer that, like *Mean Streets*, could allow Scorsese to pour in all of his pain. It worked. “I made it as if nothing else would happen after. Just burn everything down with it, you know?” Scorsese says. “*Raging Bull*, once I caught on to what it could be, then I knew I had to put everything of myself into it that was possible.”

While the result was a masterpiece, it heralded the beginning of a difficult decade. ➤



"In the '80s nobody would even talk to me," he says. "I couldn't get into a meeting, basically. *The King Of Comedy* was De Niro and I trying different things. Tightly controlled frames where there was very little camera movement; it was the opposite of what I had done in *Raging Bull*. But it was the flop of the year, they claimed in America. Except the British — you got it."

The new Hollywood was safer, less up for a risk. Scorsese failed repeatedly to get his passion (and Passion) project, *The Last Temptation Of Christ*, off the ground. And not even the combined might of he and Al Pacino could get a biopic of painter Modigliani off the ground. "It was about the extraordinary struggle to create art. The sadness of it, the absinthe," Scorsese says of the film he ultimately had to abandon. "He and [his companion] Soutine taking care of each other, with her convincing him to brush his teeth. It really would have been something special, I think. But someone who was a big producer in Hollywood said to my face, 'You're washed up. Where are you going to get the money to do it?' I didn't have the influence anymore. I was from a certain period — the world had changed and you just weren't bankable, as they say."

He hung in there, refusing to give up on his own extraordinary struggle to create art. It was *The Color Of Money*, in 1986, that started to turn things around. On the surface it was the most un-Scorsese-like of gigs — a sequel, a star vehicle and a film about pool sharks (it's hard to imagine the director of *Silence* unleashing a 9-ball thunder break). But he saw it as a challenge, a way back to the top. "Could I move quickly? Make something with a Hollywood star, on a short schedule?" He even used a payphone on set, queuing up with everyone else, as a gesture of frugality. "*Color Of Money* came in a day under, and a million dollars under," he says. "It showed a responsibility to the nature of the business itself. Even if it's not my favourite of the work I did. I wanted something deeper, you know?"

He got the chance, and then some, with his next two movies: *The Last Temptation Of Christ*, at last, and *GoodFellas*. One followed the Son Of God, the other a coke-addled mobster named Henry, but each is, in its own way, a profound study of good and evil.

As *GoodFellas* wound down, however, the director faced another crisis that tested his steel. "We went over schedule, about 15 days over, and the studio was furious," he recalls. "We were treated very badly; they even refused to give a little wrap party." Making matters more stressful: as he finished off his mobster epic, Scorsese was awaited in Hokkaido, where he was supposed to be shooting a cameo as Vincent van Gogh in Akira Kurosawa's film *Dreams*.

"I was 15 days over, Kurosawa was waiting, all these angry guys are visiting the set — everyone's mad at me!" Scorsese recounts with a grin. "I was so nervous that my doctor told me I had to stop drinking coffee."



Top to bottom: Good friends reunited again for *GoodFellas* (1990); Scorsese on location for his long-cherished *The Last Temptation Of Christ* (1988); With Matt Damon on 2006's *The Departed*; Back in NYC for this autumn's *The Irishman*.

At last, the final shot in the can, he hopped on a flight to Japan. And what was it like being directed by the iconic creator of *Seven Samurai*? "Not a lot of laughs!"



SCORSESE WOULD SEEM TO BE WALKING, talking evidence that the Tarantino Theory — which posits that directors lose steam once their output hits double digits — is off the mark. He's currently gearing up for Film 26, *Killers Of The Flower Moon*, a saga of Native Americans, lawmen and villains in 1920s Oklahoma that will bring together his two muses, Robert De Niro and Leonardo DiCaprio. "It's an incredible story, so rich," he says. "But one has to find the right point of view to tell it." He's also pondering a

biopic of Theodore Roosevelt that could star DiCaprio. And that's not including his many documentaries, the latest of which, a celebration of the Canadian comedians of *Second City Television*, is currently being cooked up in the "closet" next door. That old Scorsese curiosity is still aflame — he remains as fascinated by people of all stripes as he was as a boy, peeking down from that third-floor fire escape.

Over the past 30 years, he has hurtled from project to project at a rapid clip, as if anxious he might return to that time when he couldn't get into a meeting. His movies have featured the Dalai Lama, businessmen on Quaaludes, ambulance drivers, Jesuit priests and Jack Nicholson wielding a dildo. He's dabbled in 3D for *Hugo* ("It'll be back," he insists), deployed a CG elephant in *Gangs Of New York*, and is pioneering extensive de-ageing technology in *The Irishman* ("The risk is scary, but I had no choice"). He's even shot a scene, for *Casino*, in his least favourite environment on Earth: a golf course. "It's the worst location," he grouches. "I've been on mountains. I've been in deserts in Taiwan. Dealing with typhoons and earthquakes? Fine with me. Golf course — no! I'm allergic to everything, and I die."

His unflagging enthusiasm remains fuelled by the work of others. During our conversation, inspired by *Empire's* Britishness, he waxes lyrical about Basil Fawlty ("With Basil, one has to genuflect") and a "hysterical" Goon two-reeler called *The Case Of The Mukkinese Battle-Horn*. There is a Scorsesian blizzard of directors' names (Ozu, Mizoguchi, Renoir, Bruce Beresford), while he extols the calming qualities of Romanian cinema. He keeps up to date with new releases, too, enthusing about *Midsommar*, "The editing, the camera moves — glorious! And the image of her in the flowers? My God!"

The only time his ardour dims is when the subject of Marvel comes up. "I don't see them," he says of the MCU. "I tried, you know? But that's not cinema. Honestly, the closest I can think of them, as well-made as they are, with actors doing the best they can under the circumstances, is theme parks. It isn't the cinema of human beings trying to convey emotional, psychological experiences to another human being."

Which is not something anyone can say of his own work. And while he may be 76 years old, he's not done creating experiences yet. "I thought a few years ago I could stop, but I don't think so anymore," he says. Then he laughs. "Look, what do you want me to do — be 100 years old and making *Roosevelt*? You're going to have me coming in, giving me oxygen while I shoot!"

A centenarian Scorsese, still pointing and shooting, 25 years from now? Well, this is the man who's survived the mean streets of Manhattan, enough drugs to kill a raging bull, and *Shark Tale*. Don't rule it out. 🍷

THE IRISHMAN IS IN CINEMAS FROM 8 NOVEMBER AND ON NETFLIX FROM 27 NOVEMBER

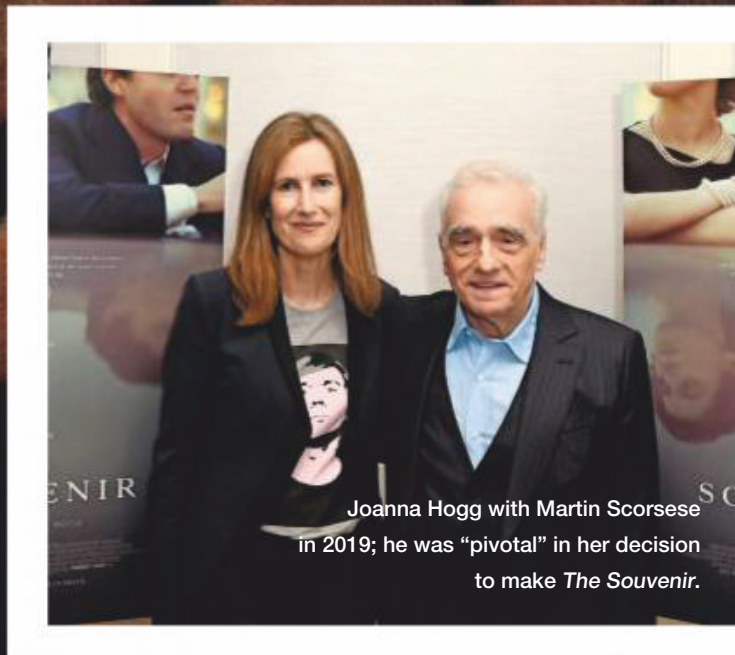
THE GOOD FEEL

MARTIN SCORSESE DOESN'T JUST MAKE GREAT FILMS —
HE INSPIRES OTHERS TO MAKE GREAT FILMS TOO.
THREE TOP BRITISH DIRECTORS SHARE WITH *EMPIRE*
THE IMPACT HE HAS HAD ON THEIR CAREERS AND LIVES

AS TOLD TO IAN FREER, CHRIS HEWITT ILLUSTRATIONS PAUL RYDING



LA



Joanna Hogg with Martin Scorsese in 2019; he was “pivotal” in her decision to make *The Souvenir*.



JOANNA HOGG

ARCHIPELAGO, THE SOUVENIR

IN 1979 I was a photographer, thinking of becoming a filmmaker, when I saw my first Martin Scorsese film, *New York, New York*. One of the key things at that time was my love of musicals. There was something about how Martin takes the classic Hollywood musical but turns it into something contemporary, alive and obviously personal to him at that time. I just found the character De Niro played and his sparring with Liza Minnelli captivating — very funny at times but also very tragic. I love how the ‘Happy Endings’ musical number becomes its own entity but also acts as the film in microcosm — so much that it has inspired something I’ve done in *The Souvenir: Part II*.

Later I loved *The King Of Comedy*, the pitch-black humour of it. I know how it feels to be a fan of someone famous and there’s that risk you take when you ask for their autograph. I adored *GoodFellas* and fell in love with Ray Liotta. I saw him in the Groucho Club and bravely went over to say how much I loved him in the film. He was in the middle of a business meeting and dealt with it relatively nicely, but it was humiliating. *The King Of Comedy* perfectly captured that kind of encounter: embarrassing and very funny.

Many people associate Martin with his bravura use of the camera, but it’s the humanity of the stories he tells: giving such profound insight into different worlds. The way he brings his characters to life — with all their insecurities and hang-ups. This is what I respond and relate to, and he does it with so much compassion and humour. On first viewing I’m not thinking about what the camera is doing. I’m just there with the characters. I am actually in that scene with Johnny Boy, Alice Hyatt, Rupert Pupkin or Henry Hill.

I came to his attention while he was making *Hugo* at Shepperton Studios. He wanted to see what British films were being made and someone gave him my second feature film, *Archipelago*. I later learned that after five minutes he turned it off because it didn’t grab him. But fortunately after thinking about it, there was something that resonated with him and he revisited it.

I first met Martin in 2012 at a reception at Claridge’s when he was collecting a BAFTA Fellowship. He knows everything about movies but is also a font of knowledge about life. He’s tapped into what’s going on around him, which is why I believe his films never date — the man behind the films stays in touch.

While I was making *Exhibition* I felt comfortable enough to show him what I was working on. He rang me while I was on Tresco, Isles of Scilly, where I shot *Archipelago*. I was staying in a cottage and there was hardly any signal. I remember going up to the top floor and leaning out of the window to hear what he was saying. I was interested in every word, but it was the worst time, the worst place to have a conversation with him.

After *Exhibition* there was a point where I wondered what to make next. He was pivotal in helping me decide — it was between a ghost story and the film that became *The Souvenir* — and it felt completely natural to ask him to executive produce *The Souvenir*. It’s a film about a filmmaker, about cinema. He has been incredibly helpful in lots of different ways, from giving feedback on music, on casting, to helping me decide on shooting formats.

The piece of advice he gave me that really stuck was not to be afraid of thinking on a grander scale. I like to keep my films intimate and small and not to let the budget get too big. His advice is not to be afraid of that: he reassures me things won’t change as much as I think. I do have one big idea in particular. I’m incredibly excited about it.



JON S. BAIRD

STAN & OLLIE, FILTH

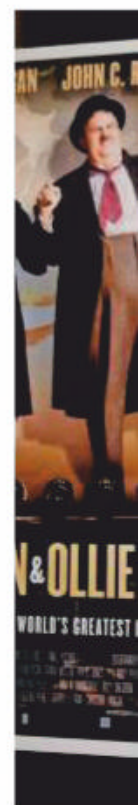
AS FAR BACK as I can remember, I always wanted to be a film director. And Martin Scorsese was a huge part of that. The first movie I saw of his in the cinema was *GoodFellas*, and then I worked backwards and started to catch up. Pretty much everything I've made, including my first short film, *It's A Casual Life*, has been influenced by a movie of his. For *It's A Casual Life*, it was around the time of *Gangs Of New York* and I looked at the opening fight scene of that movie frame by frame. For my first feature film, *Cass*, a true story of a Jamaican orphan who got caught up in a violent life and had to redeem himself, *Raging Bull* and *Mean Streets* were two

films I dipped in and out of a lot. Those films were raw and masculine, but with a redemptive edge. For *Filth*, the movie that really influenced the dark comedic tone was *The King Of Comedy*. But *GoodFellas* is a film that has influenced so many filmmakers. I opened *Stan & Ollie* with an elaborate tracking shot, and at the film's premiere in LA I bumped into Paul Thomas Anderson, who had of course done that incredible tracking shot in *Boogie Nights*. We chatted about our passion for Martin Scorsese. For me, that all came from *GoodFellas*.

I first met Marty when we were doing *Vinyl* together as I was lucky enough to be one of the directors. They said, "Mr Scorsese will meet you now," and I had to walk up a long corridor with one of the writers. It was like going to meet the Wizard of Oz. I said, "What's he like?" They said, "He's like someone doing an impression of Martin Scorsese." And that's exactly what he's like, with that rapid-fire way he talks so passionately about movies. He's also extremely

generous and an encyclopaedia of film. I told him, "You made a movie that made me want to expand as a filmmaker, and to try different tonal shifts." You could see the look in his eyes. He clearly gets that a lot, and I'm sure was expecting me to say *Taxi Driver* or *Raging Bull*. But I said *The King Of Comedy*, which is actually my favourite Scorsese movie, and I think that's what got us off to a brilliant start. We ended up speaking for an hour about *The King Of Comedy* and how he and De Niro picked Rupert Pupkin's suit off a mannequin in a dodgy shop on Broadway. I joked with him that I felt like Rupert Pupkin to his Jerry Lewis.

After that, I got very close to Mr S and since then he's given me incredible advice on *Stan & Ollie*, he's introduced screenings for Oscar voters, and I flew over last month to ask for his thoughts on a new project I'm doing. He really is a guiding light, not only with the films he's done, but as a person. And I've got his number on speed-dial. I'm very, very blessed to have that.



Getty Images/Alamy/GODLIS



Rupert Pupkin (De Niro) in his *King Of Comedy* shop dummy suit. **Below:** Scorsese is Baird's "guiding light", advising on *Stan & Ollie*.

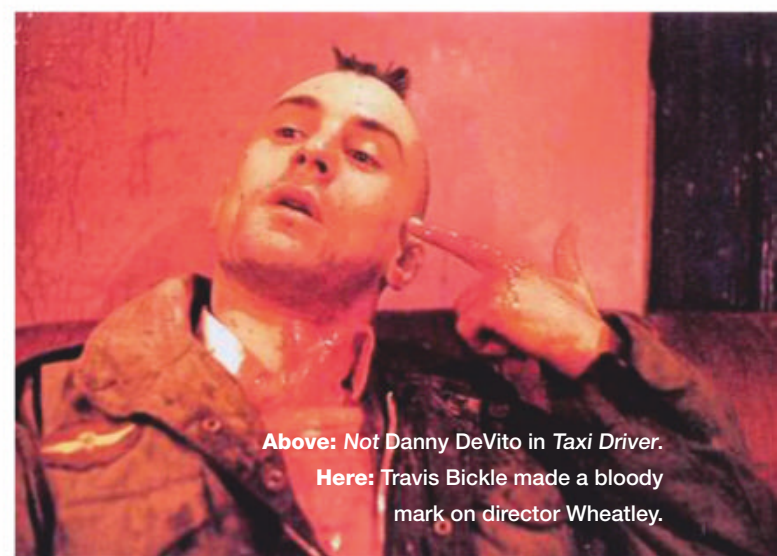


BEN WHEATLEY

FREE FIRE, HIGH RISE

SCORSESE WAS THE first director I recognised as a director. The entry point was *Taxi Driver*, which I came to through De Niro. I didn't know who Scorsese was. I thought it had something to do with Danny DeVito and *Taxi*, the TV show. But when I saw it, the floor opened up for me. It felt like it attacked me through the screen. It was a gritty '70s film, but at the same time an arthouse movie. It was a vigilante movie, but a French New Wave movie. It was a major moment. I started to realise what a cineaste filmmaker was — someone who loves cinema, and made films which were a reaction to it, rather than just mashing other people's ideas together. He was in conversation with the American cinema of the '40s and '50s, and the arthouse European cinema, Japanese cinema, Italian cinema. It was a filter for all those things. Through the focus of his taste my own taste got formed to a degree.

A few years ago, someone came up to me at an Empire Awards party and said, there's an interview in *The Telegraph* and Scorsese mentioned *Kill List* as a film he'd enjoyed. I said, a) that's crazy and b) if that's true I'm over the moon. And he had mentioned *Kill List*, and *Archipelago*, and Andrea Arnold's *Red Road*. That's when he was making *Hugo* over here, and had asked to see what up-and-coming British filmmakers were up to. I went to my American agents, who represented Scorsese, and said, "If there's any chance of meeting him, can it be arranged?" They said yes. And so I finally met him



Above: Not Danny DeVito in *Taxi Driver*.
Here: Travis Bickle made a bloody mark on director Wheatley.

during the press tour for *Sightseers*. I chatted to him for a couple of hours, which was basically the highlight of my film career. It's a bizarre thing to meet someone you have coffee-table books about. I've never really been starstruck, but it felt very heightened with him. We talked about films and general stuff. I came out of it on a high.

After that, we stayed in touch. He gave us a lovely quote on *A Field In England* and then we got chatting to Emma Tillinger [Koskoff], who is his producer. They were looking for films to executive produce, so we sent over the script for *Free Fire* over and they said, "Let's do it." Working with him was very easy. He never came down to Brighton, down the old Argus building round the back of Marks & Spencer. He let us make the film without interference. When it was done, I took the film to New York and sat in the screening room at Sikalia, his production company, and showed it to him. He had notes on clarity and making sure things were clear, and the use of music. He was very encouraging and it's a style of exec producing I've tried to use. It's about help, and not giving tons of notes.

When you meet guys like that, you realise that they are in the epicentre of cinema. They're the bridging generation who met the founders of cinema. When he was 25, 30, he met people who'd been in Hollywood since near the beginning. As a film fan, this is it, this is the whole thing embodied in one human. For me, he's probably the greatest living filmmaker. **E**



The Art of the Orgy

IN 1999, AFTER OVER A DECADE AWAY, **Stanley Kubrick** RETURNED ONE LAST TIME WITH DARK, DREAMLIKE ODYSSEY **Eyes Wide Shut**. TWENTY YEARS ON, *EMPIRE* SPEAKS TO THOSE INVOLVED TO UNRAVEL THE MYSTERIES OF ITS MOST ICONIC

SEQUENCE: THE MASKED BALL

WORDS ALEX GODFREY DIGITAL IMAGING PETER CROWTHER

Stanley Kubrick's final film, 1999's **Eyes Wide Shut**, had been a long time coming.

Kubrick had been interested in adapting *Traumnovelle* ['Dream Story'], Arthur Schnitzler's novella about the romantic complexities of marriage, since 1969, and when he finally began developing it in earnest in the early '90s, he knew the book's sinister masked ball would be the centrepiece.

Reeling from the fantasy confessions of his wife Alice (Nicole Kidman), Dr Bill Harford (Tom Cruise) treks into the New York night, eventually blagging his way into an elite evening involving dubious masked men, beautiful women, a whole lot of nudity and a shedload of threat. The dramatic highlight of the film, it's a beautiful, foreboding sequence, dripping with atmosphere. But enough set-up — say "Fidelio" and head on in...

Kubrick was fairly faithful in adapting the sequence from Schnitzler's novel, but filtered it through his own perspective.

Jan Harlan (executive producer): In Stanley Kubrick's mind this was a modern Hell. The centrepiece of the film was jealousy. Self-destruction through jealousy, a derivative of envy. Bill Harford finds himself there by chance and curiosity, but always driven by the same jealousy and desperate attempt of revenge. The challenge for Kubrick was to succeed in creating this Hieronymus Bosch-inspired Hell.

Leon Vitali (Stanley Kubrick's assistant/casting agent/'Red Cloak'): In the book the masked ball is kind of earthbound: it centres on a person whose ego is being bruised and dented. But Stanley developed it in such a way that it becomes almost a life-and-death thing. It's something Bill has to go through to become the person he becomes at the end.

Lisa Leone (set decorator/second-unit director): It's a psychological journey but also what was interesting to Stanley, and me, was these secret societies. Who are these people, what are they doing? It's this mystery. We were like, "Yeah, I think there are these secret societies with these politicians, these men."

Vitali: People say, "It's all about the Illuminati." No, it's not. It was about power, and what it could do, how it can control.

With pre-production taking shape, Kubrick began developing the orgy with cast and crew, finding the tone as he went.

Yolande Snaith (choreographer): Stanley described the orgy scene as more of a suggestive masked dance scene. My understanding was that that was based on what he'd seen of my choreography, because in my [1996] film *Swinger* there were a lot of intimate choreographies between couples — they were subtle, but very seductive, a lot of bodies rolling around each other. He wanted something in that area of artistic expression.

Abigail Good ('Mysterious Woman'): That whole scene was meant to be a dream sequence: a contemporary-dance,

choreographed piece. They cast a few models but also ballet dancers, and a lot of the men were ballet dancers too. We were doing ballet lifts. Over months we would come up with ideas, and Leon would record it. He would come back and say Stanley wanted us to try it like this and that. And eventually he came back with pictures from the *Kama Sutra*. He said, "Stanley would like you to maybe use this as inspiration."

Vitali: He just wanted to get an idea of how far we could go before it looked tawdry and on that barrier of being really pornographic. So we were edging it all the way through those months to get the atmosphere we wanted to create.

Snaith: I didn't do the orgy scene in the end — my focus went on the ceremony. As far as I know the orgy scene didn't have a choreographer, and also it became a lot shorter. I think when it got to that point in the film Stanley wanted it to be a short blast of total orgy.

Harlan: It wasn't erotic but expressed utter decadence. It could be said that this is where Kubrick failed, since many people thought it was supposed to be erotic.

Jocelyn Pook (composer): The original sketch I did [for 'Backwards Priests', the song that became 'Masked Ball'] was when I was working with a dance company. I really love that unsettling quality and strangeness of backwards singing. And I came across a cassette of Romanian orthodox priests.

Snaith: I'd been working with different music in the studio, and I was a big fan of Jocelyn Pook's music, so I was playing 'Backwards Priests'. And when Stanley was looking at the rehearsal tapes, he said, "What is that music?" He had this total gut feeling about it.

Vitali: It gave it a spooky atmosphere, which you couldn't do if you said, "Write some spooky music." It was very infectious. That's how Jocelyn came to write more of the music.

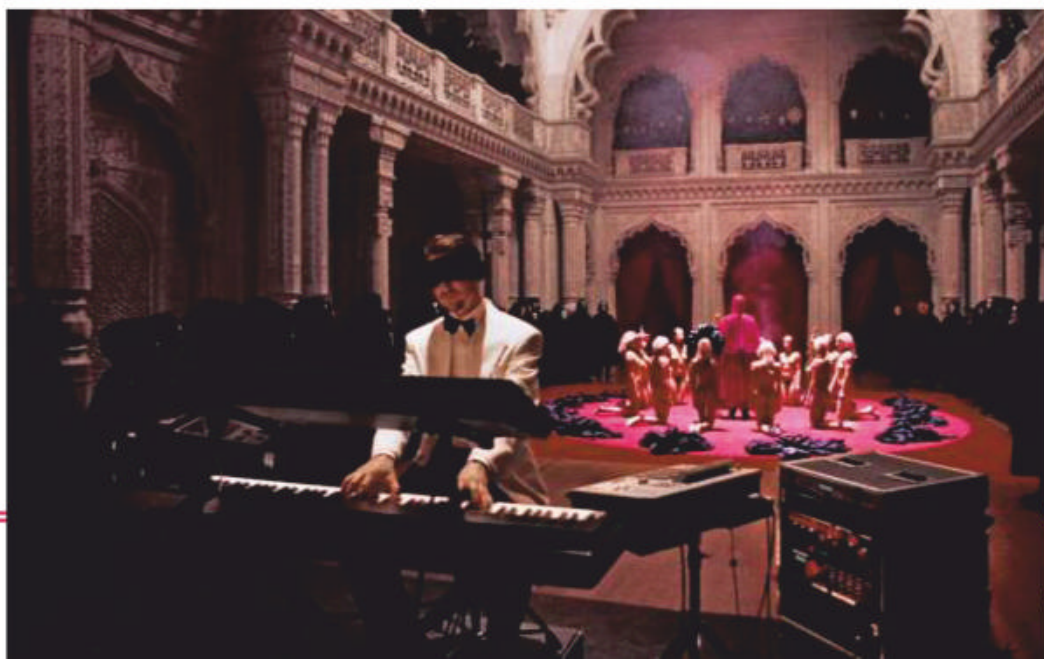
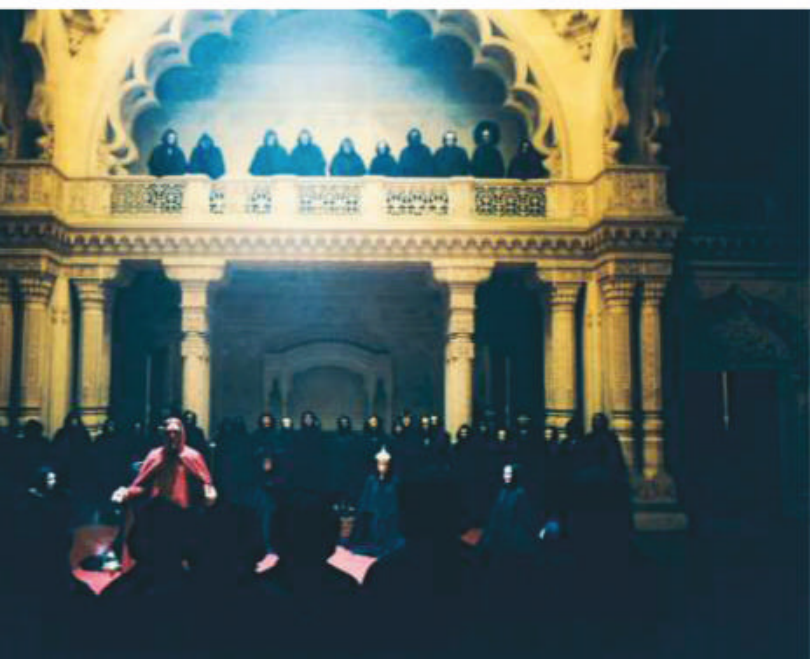
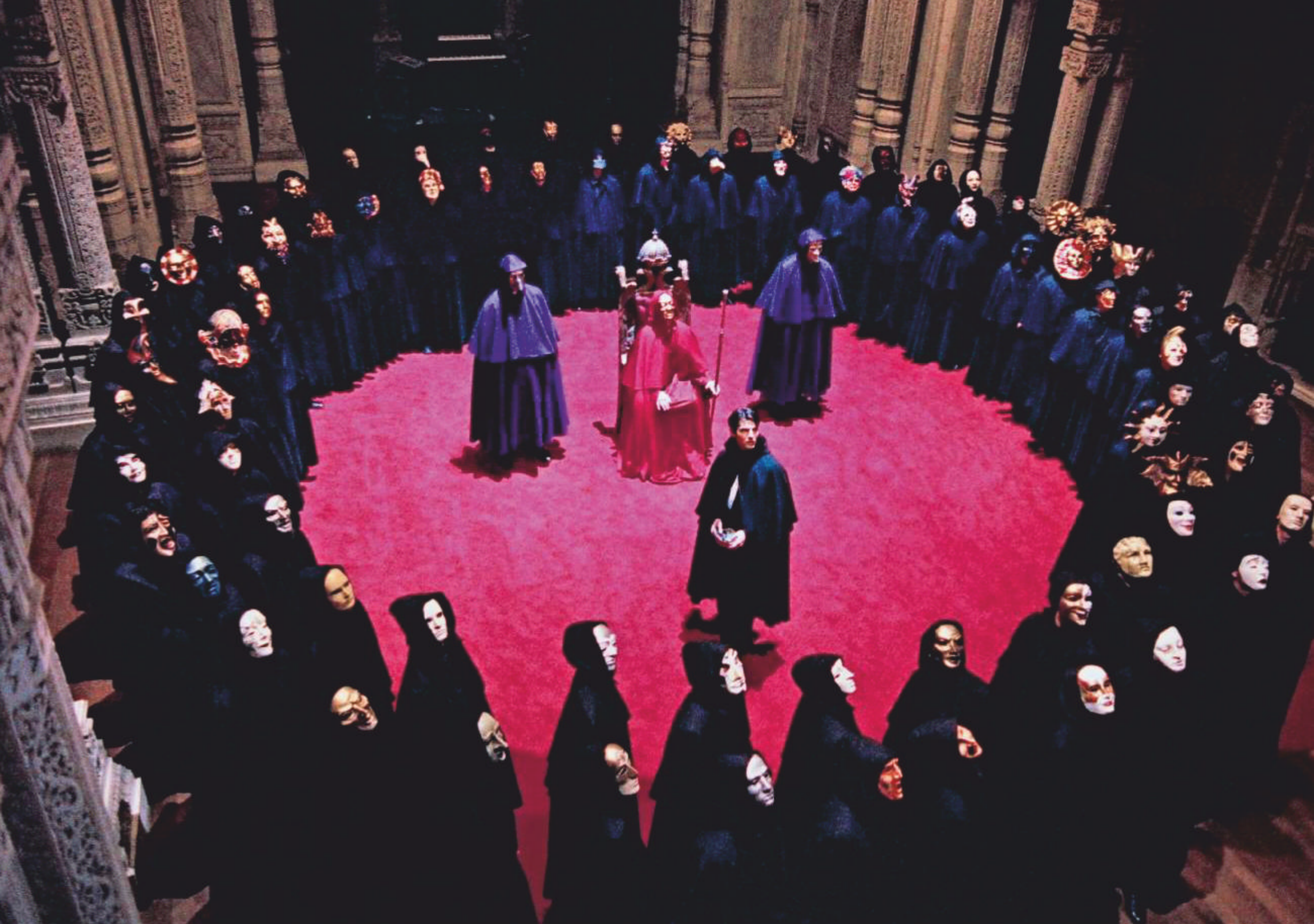
Pook: I met Stanley in an office in Pinewood. For the orgy scene he said, "I don't know what's gonna be right for this but, you know, sexy music." And I was like, "Oh my God, sexy music, what the hell is that?" You think of Barry White or something. It was really daunting. I wrote a piece, 'Dionysus', and he gave it some consideration, but didn't use it. It went on my *Untold Things* album, and later Scorsese used it in *Gangs Of New York*. He doesn't know it was written for *Eyes Wide Shut*!

Vitali: I went around with Stanley looking at locations. In the end, it came down to Elveden Hall in Suffolk because every inch of that room and corridor was carved marble. We did some interior scenes in Highclere Castle [in Hampshire], which has a beautiful library — you see Tom go through it, watching the activity. Napoleon's chair and desk are in there. I said to Stanley, "Do you know that's Napoleon's chair? Why don't you sit in it?" And he said, "Ohh... I don't know if I should." It was so touching.

Leone: There wasn't that much to decorate [in Elveden Hall], some of it was already there. The [statues of] naked ladies holding



Unmasked:
Director
Stanley
Kubrick
conducts the
congress.



Clockwise from main: Tom Cruise's Bill Harford is centre stage; The 'Red Cloak' figure (Leon Vitali) holds court; Todd Field as pianist Nick Nightingale; Beautiful Elveden Hall in Suffolk; Setting up a shot.

the bulbs above when Tom walks in, I was so excited when I found those, they're just so beautiful, very sexy and seductive. Stanley really loved them; he said, "These are perfect!"

Todd Field ('Nick Nightingale'): I had no agent at the time. I simply received a call from the William Morris agency saying, "Stanley Kubrick is looking for you." I was driving and got so startled I ran into another car.

Vitali: I called Todd and he said, "I've met you before." He used to hang out with Matthew Modine, who took him all over the world when he was doing the publicity for *Full Metal Jacket*.

Field: Jan Harlan drove me to Luton Hoo where Stanley was doing lighting tests. That manor house must have a hundred rooms and I spent the better part of the day photographing and exploring every one of them before I finally got the nerve to go anywhere near the ballroom. I stood in the doorway and watched Stanley work. After a few minutes he turned, looked straight at me with that gaze of his, smiled and said, "You're here. Come inside and see what we're doing." I stumbled forward, held out my hand and said, "I'm Todd Field." Stanley laughed, "I know who the fuck you are, I hired you. Can I see that?" He gestured to my camera. I handed it over and he asked me what an M6 was going for these days.

The Eyes Wide Shut shoot was notoriously lengthy, and the masked ball was a sizeable chunk itself. As ever with Kubrick, no stones were left unturned.

Pook: My music was playing on set, because Nick Nightingale is playing keyboards, he's supposed to be creating the music. So Todd was playing along in time to the music.

Field: I took a seat at the keyboard and started rehearsing 'Backward Priests' to playback. At a certain point, the music suddenly stopped. I stood, looked around, and saw Stanley standing alone on the other side of the room wearing a huge grin and holding up a blindfold. I went over, he spun me around, tied it on my head, and said, "Now you're ready."

Good: One day they asked me if I would go in to meet Stanley. He told me I'd been given this role now ['Mysterious Woman'] and I'm wearing this mask and have to learn these lines. Next thing I know I was working with Tom and standing in a room working through lines and delivery. It was incredible.

Field: The only time he offered specific direction in the sequence was once, when he was arriving to work, he had [his driver] Emilio stop the car. Tom and I were outside playing football and Stanley rolled down his window and said, "Your hands were off a bit in yesterday's dailies. We'll do it again."

Leone: One thing that really struck me as a young music-video cinematographer is that it was okay to say, "I don't know." There were so many times we would stand together and somebody would ask Stanley something and he'd say, "I don't know." And he was so open to ideas.

Good: It's madness, filming with Stanley — he's a perfectionist. One day I remember him explaining to the DOP that there was a light out. He said, "I don't think there is, Stanley. Nobody's been on set, nothing's changed." He said, "There's a light out, find it." And we shut down, we all had to sit down and do nothing for a day until they found it. And they found it. And it was something like — I heard — a stop out. [A stop refers to the amount of light being captured.] That was the level of his perfection.

Vitali: I must have seen about a dozen people for the Red Cloak role. Then one morning after about six weeks of this, Stanley called and said, "I've decided, Leon, you're gonna play the part," and he put the phone down.

Snaith: When that character is in the middle with the incense burner, that's Russell Trigg, one of the dancers in my company. Later, when that figure was speaking, it's Leon. One of the things that we spent ages on with Stanley was the tracking: the cameraman was walking very slowly around the circle to film that. Getting the



Above: The 'Mysterious Woman' (Abigail Good) and Harford enter the party.

Right: Leon Vitali was actually Kubrick's personal assistant at the time, but after much searching the director gave him the key Red Cloak role. **Bottom:** Filming the sinister partygoers — Kubrick was intrigued by the notion of secret societies.





Top: Harford is revealed.

Above: Todd Field (left). Aptly, he later directed *In The Bedroom*...

Above left: Good in a less mysterious moment.

Left: Up close and very personal.

Below: The Mysterious Woman and Harford kiss.

right amount of incense in shot at the right moment in relation to the timing of the women's sequence of movement. That took forever.

Good: We did it over, and over, and over again. They had to get frozen peas because we were in that bloody circle on our knees all the time and our knees were swelling up.

Field: During the sequence I was the only one on set with my eyes shut. Being in the dark with Pook's music as the only anchor was a bit like checking into an eternal sensory-deprivation retreat. Yes, Stanley did many takes. But this was for very practical reasons that made sense once he explained them. It was in no way gratuitous.

Vitali: Everything was a slow growth. Tom coming in and me saying, "What's the password?" — we must have done it 40 times, more. Tom was great. It's one of the longest shoots on record, and there was never a word of complaint. He was so focused on what he was doing and on working with Stanley, and I think that says a lot about Stanley, that Tom subjugated himself to what he was exploring.

Soon after Kubrick passed away towards the end of post-production, the American censors asked for changes to the sexual content. To avoid making any edits, the producers obscured some of the thrusting with computer-generated cloaked onlookers. The digital offenders were subsequently removed for home-entertainment formats, and today the film lives on as intended, continually reappraised.

Harlan: When the first AD [Brian Cook] and I told Stanley that he may get into trouble with the MPAA's self-imposed rating system and suggested a 'cover shot' filming the scene with the girls wearing a gown, he simply dismissed this concern as ridiculous. Unfortunately we had trouble in the US and needed to digitally superimpose more voyeurs to cover some of the offending figures, since receiving an R rating was a contractual requirement.

Vitali: We fought it. We appealed and appealed again. The idea of it going out as it was, with an X certificate, was a step too far, because to everyone X is just pornographic, so that would have made it even more open to that kind of salacious kind of idea of what the film's about. So we came up with this CGI answer, putting those figures in between Tom and the action. We didn't have to do that anywhere else in the world. America talks about how free they are, but this is the one place where we had to do that.

Leone: I saw the film again recently and got such a different read on it, 20 years later, being in a committed relationship. Part of it is the fantasies that go on in your mind when you're in a committed relationship with somebody, and the struggle you have of feeling guilty about something that might or might not have happened. It's this line of loving somebody so much, but at the same time feeling like, "I could just walk out and leave this whole thing behind."

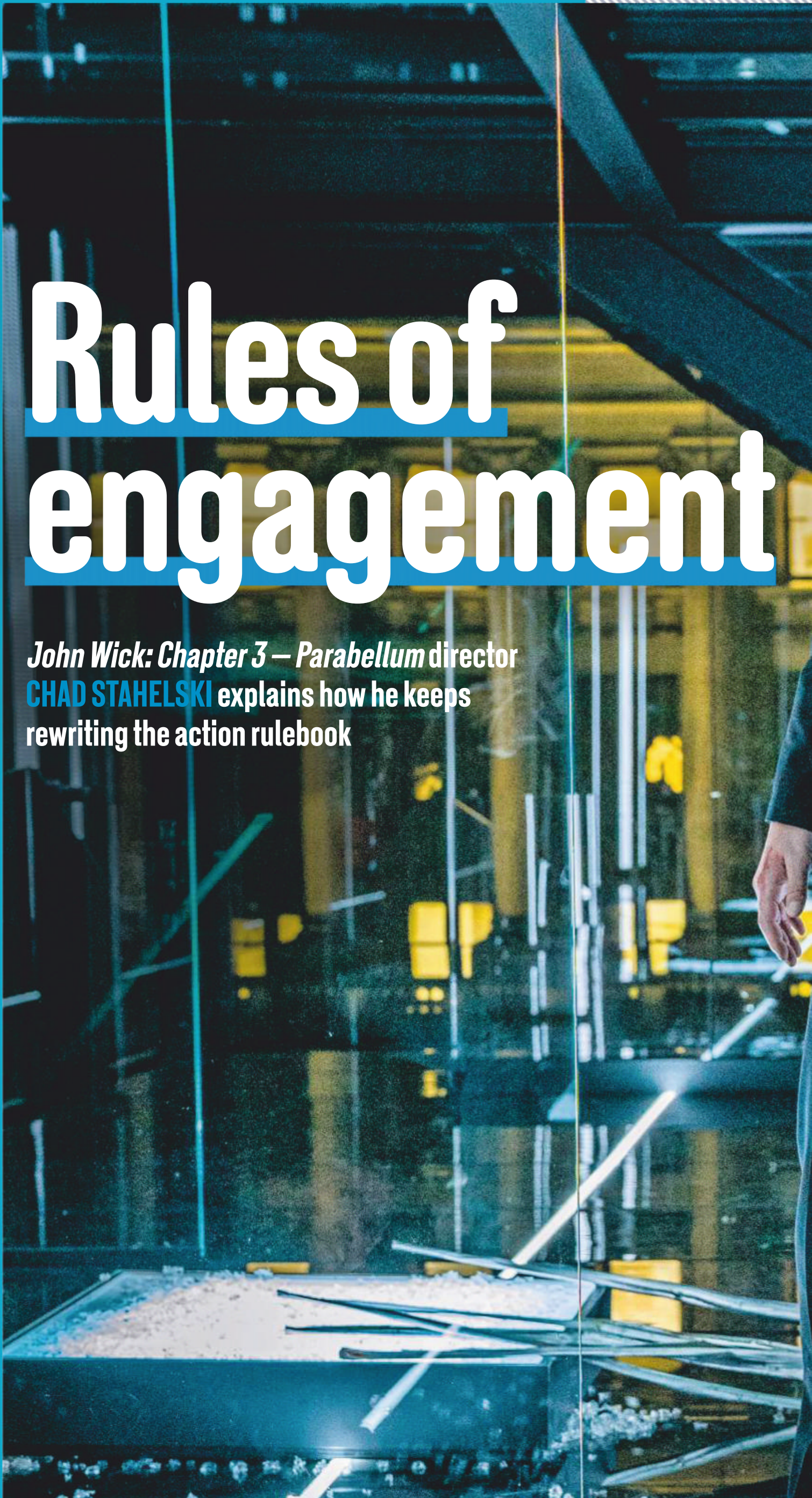
Good: Being older and divorced, and having met somebody and left my marriage, and everything that that brings up... Now, as an adult woman, it's amazing to get my head into what the film was about. Jealousy and affairs and all that kind of stuff. I've matured and the film has matured for me.

Field: It's gratifying that Stanley's film is still very much in the conversation. Especially considering some of the shots critics took back in '99, saying he was "out of touch". I remember some complaining the downtown New York streets didn't look "real", that maybe they looked that way back when "Stanley lived there". They were of course entirely missing the point, critiquing the age of the filmmaker and not his intent. It would have been very simple and, some might say, artless to reproduce those streets precisely. The source material is Schnitzler's novella *Traumnovelle*, or 'Dream Story.' And this dream was clearly Stanley's intent. The film has stood the test of time pretty well. Because though we may not all be critics, we all dream. 🍷

EYES WIDE SHUT IS IN CINEMAS FROM 29 NOVEMBER. WITH THANKS TO SK FILM ARCHIVES LLC, WARNER BROS. AND UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS LONDON

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INDISPENSABLE HOME ENTERTAINMENT [EDITED BY CHRIS HEWITT]



Rules of engagement

John Wick: Chapter 3 – Parabellum director **CHAD STAHELSKI** explains how he keeps rewriting the action rulebook



Keanu Reeves tools up as the indefatigable John Wick. **Right:** Former stuntman Chad Stahelski heads behind the camera for the third time on *John Wick: Chapter 3 – Parabellum*.

CHAD STAHELSKI IS a man of action. Literally. This is a guy who started off as a stuntman, became one of the best in the business, and is the sort of person who can nonchalantly drop a sentence like, “I’ve been in a lot of environments where you see actual violence, and it’s brutal,” into casual conversation. He’s walked the walk, talked the talk, jumped the jump, exploded the explosion.

And now he’s channelling all those years of experience into becoming one of the best action directors around. He’s directed just three movies so far, but those movies just happen to be the *John Wick* trilogy, in which Stahelski and his creative partner, one Keanu Reeves, seek to elevate the modern American action movie into a hybrid of influences and styles with the aim of being much, much more than the sum of its parts. “You’ve all seen a knife fight. How do I make it different?” he muses. “You’ve all seen a gunfight. How do I make that different? You’ve all seen a *John Wick* movie. How do I make a John Wick movie better?”

As *John Wick: Chapter 3 – Parabellum*, with its knife fights, dog fights, death by book and much more, hits home, he tells us how.

REALISM RULES

The standout sequence of *John Wick: Chapter 3*, and perhaps the action scene of the year, is a sloppy, chaotic, desperate battle between Reeves’ embattled hitman and a group of assassins that just happens to take place in an antique store filled with knives and axes. In the sort of twist that almost never happens on *Bargain Hunt*, John and his attackers hurl knives at each other. And not always with the effect we’re conditioned to expect. “What happens in every knife fight?” asks Stahelski. “Your hero, who you’ve never seen with a knife before, picks up a knife, throws it 200 feet, it sticks in the guy’s forehead.” So far, so every Arnold Schwarzenegger film of the 1980s. “Now, I guarantee you’ve picked up one of Mom’s steak knives and thrown it at a tree,” continues Stahelski, getting weirdly specific. “It’s bounced back and hit you in the fucking head, right? That happens nine out of ten fucking times.” The noble sacrifice of Mrs Stahelski’s



silverware wasn't for naught. It directly inspired this sequence, where knives very rarely find their target... until John finds his range, at which point the bad guys become human pin cushions. "Everybody fucking misses," says Stahelski. "That's a real fight. We take a little bit of reality and mix it in. If you watch Keanu, he slips and fucks up almost as much as he wins."

EMBRACE YOUR INFLUENCES

At one point, as hordes of High Table hired hands storm the lobby of the Continental in an ultimately futile attempt to kill John Wick, the lighting colour scheme changes to neon green. Or, as Stahelski calls it, "Matrix green". As if Keanu Reeves saying "guns... lots of guns" wasn't already a fairly sizeable doff of the cap to the Wachowskis' 1999 action classic which saw Stahelski perform as Reeves' stunt double. "It's the *Matrix*'s 20th anniversary, so that's my little thank you to the Wachowskis," he laughs. "And rather than just say 'thank you' to each of them, I thought, 'I'm going to turn a whole set-piece Matrix green.' It's a big lovefest."

Which also describes much of *Parabellum*, which is a love letter to a myriad other movies. Whether it's *Game Of Death* or *Blade Runner* or even *Monty Python And The Holy Grail*, it's jam-packed with references and in-jokes. Or 'thank yous', as Stahelski might put it. "Take away all the acting and thematics and all the Hollywood talk, and John Wick is a tribute to every movie I love," says Stahelski. "You can see the Leone. You can see the Kurosawa. You can see Steve McQueen in *Bullitt*. We're looking back to Bruce Lee, way back to Jackie Chan, way back to the Shaw Brothers."

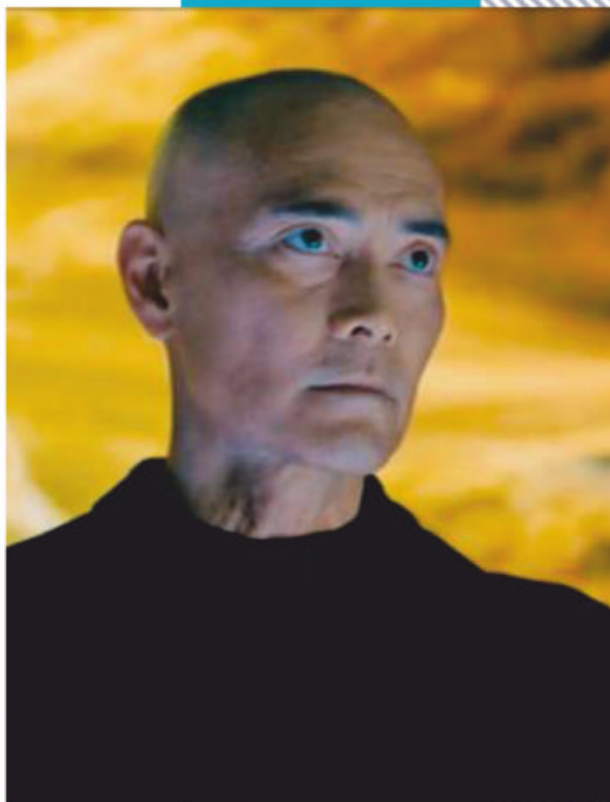
The film's main villain, Zero, is played by martial arts legend Mark Dacascos, while *The Raid 2*'s Cecep Arif Rahman and Yayan Ruhian play his unfailingly polite henchmen. "You look at our guys, they are the best of the best in the business for martial arts stuntmen."

BE AWARE OF YOUR SURROUNDINGS

A self-professed student of architecture, Stahelski recognises the importance of setting action scenes against interesting and unusual backdrops. So, in *Parabellum*, there are fight scenes on a bridge, or in the courtyard of a Casablanca hotel, or in stables. The final showdown between John Wick and Team Zero takes place in, essentially, a glass box, where ninjas use shadows and light to hide themselves. "You can tell I have a boner for reflections and glass," laughs Stahelski. "Could we hide an army of ninjas behind seethrough glass? We did that with reflections. I thought that was clever."

The first fight sequence in the movie is a brutal showdown in the New York Public Library between John and Ernest, a humungous hitman played by basketball player Boban Marjanovic, "who has the biggest hands in the NBA". As the two pound seven shades out of each other in the Russian Literature section, the contrast in sizes

Below, top to bottom: Wick bathed in *Matrix* green; The film's action sequences do not skimp on the brutality; Martial artist Mark Dacascos as the nefarious Zero.



between the two men speaks to one of Stahelski's biggest thematic preoccupations. "I wanted to create a super big world that makes John Wick feel very small," he says. "He's just a little guy in a big world. That's the visual thematic of all our set-pieces." The library fight came to Stahelski when he was visiting the iconic building — perhaps used to greatest effect previously in *Ghostbusters*. "It hit me," he says. "I couldn't have him just shoot somebody or stab somebody with a pencil. I had to do something different. I wanted a giant."

Thematic concerns are also uppermost in Stahelski's mind. *John Wick: Chapter 3* is a movie dense with references to art, culture, philosophy (Nietzsche is quoted) and poetry (as is Dante). It's a movie in which a man is beaten to death with a book, but Stahelski wants that book — in this case a collection of Russian folk tales by Aleksandr Afanasyev from 1864, in which John stores the last picture he has of his late wife — to be significant. "It doesn't take much to draw parallels from Dante to a Russian book about the Baba Yaga, which is also the book that encloses



Left: Halle Berry joins the cast as hotel manager and fellow dog owner Sofia. **Below:** Boban Marjanovic as assassin Ernest. **Bottom:** Wick comes over all *Chien Andalou*.

his wife's memory," says Stahelski. "Our symbolism kinda beats you over the head. It literally beats you over the head."

DON'T DO THE SAME THING TWICE

"I talk a lot about my love of dance, ballet, theatre," says Stahelski, who goes on to namedrop *Hamilton* and *Porgy And Bess* in the space of a few seconds. "If you have to sit through a ballet for two hours, and just saw the same eight dancers do the same dance, with the same outfits, you'd be bored off your fucking rocker, right?" It's hard to quibble. "So they change costumes, they change rhythm, they change songs. We call it a lot of a little."

The same maxim applied to *John Wick: Chapter 3*. "How do we change?" he asks. "I'll change the visuals, I'll change the set-pieces, I'll change the opponents, I'll change martial art styles, I'll change the choreography. I'll make it funny, I'll make it violent. I'll do a little of both in a fight scene." Nowhere is that greater illustrated within *Parabellum* than in the showdown in Casablanca, where John Wick and his reluctant

partner, Sofia (Halle Berry), take on a small army. For the first time in the trilogy, Stahelski actually takes the focus away from John for an extended spell, choosing to follow Sofia and her killer Belgian Malinois as they make a whole mound of mercenary mincemeat. "We always had this idea of a secondary character who had suffered like John, losing a family or giving up something to protect their world," explains Stahelski. "Male, female, it didn't matter to me. If I was going to come off the character of Wick and focus on another character, it had to be someone who was a lot more than just physically good."

NEVER STOP SUBVERTING

Subversion is a big thing for Stahelski. He mentions it a lot. "We have a fucked-up kind of chivalry in John Wick," he says. "I call it the Subversive Code; chivalry turned on its head. 'You can fuck people over, but not in this hotel.' The library fight is about subversion for him. The key is finding what audiences expect, and doing the opposite, or as close to the opposite as you can. "John Wick is supposed to be the best shot in the world," he says. "But he misses too, and when people shoot at him, they hit him. Which is why we put him in the bulletproof suit. You can't make the bad guys look idiotic, or our hero looks idiotic. So we subvert what you think the image is, and make every fight scene feel different thematically and visually."

INCREASE THE INTENSITY

"I'm not into gore or violence," says Stahelski. "I'm really not. I don't think you should exploit violence, nor do I think you should hide from it. When people fight with edged weapons, it's brutal." He's not kidding. *Parabellum* features some of the most eye-wateringly violent fight scenes since the *Raid* movies, including a moment where John slowly slides a knife into an unwilling eye (take that, *Un Chien Andalou*), and more head shots than a casting director's wall. "When people fight,

you get stabbed. Shit happens when you get a shotgun to the face. But I'm not trying to push violence." Instead, Stahelski reveals that he's actually playing a little game with the ultra-violence. "If you look at the blood splatters on the wall, there'll be happy faces, there'll be unicorns, there'll be things we put in to make light of the situation. If you go back through the movie frame by frame, you'll see all sorts of shit." Challenge accepted. **CHRIS HEWITT**



JOHN WICK: CHAPTER 3 — PARABELLUM IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY, 4K AND DOWNLOAD

Just another day
at the office for
John Cusack's
Martin Q. Blank.

THE MASTERPIECE

We reassess the greatest
films of all time, one
film at a time

Grosse Pointe Blank

NOSTALGIA WAS RIFE at the movies in 1997. Thanks to a vague fear of the oncoming train that was Y2K, Generation X embraced the past like never before. The original *Star Wars* trilogy made a hugely trumpeted return to the big screen, *Austin Powers* fondly fondled the Bond films of old, and *Romy And Michele's High School Reunion* was one of two films

that summer whose protagonists would confront the past in the faces of their former schoolmates against a backdrop of '80s bangers. The other would do so with an equally killer soundtrack but more actual killers. Want to feel old? It's 22 years since *Grosse Pointe Blank* was released!

The story of a professional hitman, forced to reassess his life when his One Last Job coincides with his ten-year high-school reunion in the town of Grosse Pointe, Michigan, came to budding writer Tom Jankiewicz when an invite to his own reunion gave him the impetus to crack on with some actual scriptwriting. After all, he needed to show his ex-classmates that he'd done something with the last decade, and his idea tapped into a universal fear: have we made the best use of our time?

Picked up by John Cusack and his troupe of Chicago-based actors and writers (after Kiefer Sutherland reportedly passed on it), the script was rewritten, moulded through improv and cut down from swathes of footage by director George Armitage until what remained was a lean, efficient action comedy with an enormous heart. Over two decades on, it continues to hold up a mirror to those wistful Gen Xers still clinging to some unresolved piece of their youth, regardless

of whether or not they once killed the president of Paraguay with a fork.

Martin Blank (Cusack) is a hollow man. An ex-army, former government assassin who's now freelance, he's approaching 30 and suffering an existential crisis. Therapy isn't helping, because he refuses to accept that his crippling angst might be connected to his profession. "It's not me," he tells his marks as they beg him for mercy, when he should be telling himself. So when the chance to reconnect with his abandoned past — and his ex-girlfriend Debi (an adorable Minnie Driver), who he stood up on prom night — comes along, he decides to give it a shot.

What unfolds is flawless filmmaking. Every character is sympathetically written and acted, from the leads down to the single-sceners (pour one out for tragic Arlene Osloff-Joseph, dishing out name badges at the reunion with a rictus grin of forced bonhomie). Maybe it's because Jankiewicz based them on people he knew; maybe it's because they're mostly played by Cusack's own friends and family, including Jeremy Piven as Blank's old buddy Paul, stuck in the rat race and verging on a breakdown, and Cusack's sister Joan, on fire as his hilariously acerbic secretary, Marcella. Look closely at the wide shot of the supporting cast dancing at the



Left, above: With psychotic arch-rival Grocer (Dan Aykroyd). Left: Minnie Driver as Blank's former girlfriend Debi, with still unimpressed dad Bart (Mitchell Ryan). Below: Blank gaze.

reunion: each of them tells you everything you need to know about their character in just a few seconds of dance.

Meanwhile Dan Aykroyd is having an absolute blast as business rival Grocer, an unwelcome vision of Blank's possible future, who's failing to convince the self-described lone wolf to join his union of assassins. There's a hint of post-communist political commentary here — Armitage majored in economics and political science at UCLA — but it's a thin stratum of subtext in a film more interested in soulmates than solidarity.

And then there's the whip-smart dialogue, from which you can pick almost any line and mine it for further meaning: "How's your life?", one reunion attendee asks Blank, to which he replies, "In progress"; "You've grown up... a bit" is a merciless dig at Blank from Debi's father; Marcella's remark to her boss that, "I just find it amusing that you came from somewhere," wouldn't be out of place in the recent, backstory-focused Bond films.

Augmenting the writing is a handful of small but perfectly formed set-pieces that consistently develop the plot and characters. Arguably the best of these is a brutal, initially slick but ultimately messy scrap (even the fights have arcs) between Blank and fabulously named rival hitman Felix La Pubelle, played by Cusack's kickboxing trainer Benny 'The Jet' Urquidez. The fight erupts from nowhere, kicks you in the face a few times and is over before it's barely begun, brought to a satisfying conclusion by the deployment of Chekhov's ballpoint pen. Accompanying the scene are the staccato stylings of The Beat's 1980 hit 'Mirror In The Bathroom': just one of a torrent of on-point soundtrack choices that intensify the nostalgia factor and

raise the film to skin-prickling greatness.

But it's Blank's search for himself amongst his past, and his relationship with Debi (brought to life by sparkling chemistry between Cusack and Driver), that drive *Grosse Pointe Blank* into our hearts. Fending off threats to his life and meaningless psychobabble from all corners ("Repeat after me: I am rooted in the me who is on this adventure," witters his therapist), Blank eventually finds peace in the bottomless, saucer eyes of a former classmate's baby. It's a beautiful moment, and the second of two occasions in which Cusack looks directly into camera. The first is during an early, fruitless therapy session, and the connection between the two shots suggests that the baby, and the ideas of innocence and new beginnings it represents, might just hold the answers Blank's been looking for.

Those notions of lost youth and a simpler time are primary components of the nostalgia business in which the film trades, and 22 years later *Grosse Pointe Blank* is as much a subject of nostalgia as nostalgia is a subject of *Grosse Pointe Blank*. "You can never go home again," Blank complains to his therapist when he discovers his old house has been bulldozed to make way for a convenience store. It's a neat summary of the film's melancholy message, but those of us in the real world can take heart: we'll always have Grosse Pointe. **NEIL ALCOCK**

GROSSE POINTE BLANK IS OUT NOW
ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DOWNLOAD

JOHN CUSACK BY NUMBERS

ALL THE STATS YOU NEED
TO KNOW ABOUT THE GROSSE
POINTE BLANK STAR



28/6/66 BORN IN
EVANSTON,
ILLINOIS

2012 HIS HIGHEST-GROSSING
FILM, WHICH TOOK
\$769 MILLION

10 MILLION
FOLLOWERS
ON TWITTER

4 MEMBERS OF THE
CUSACK FAMILY
WHO APPEAR IN
GROSSE POINTE
BLANK (JOHN,
SISTERS JOAN
AND ANN, AND
BROTHER BILL)

6 THE LEVEL OF
BLACK BELT
HE HOLDS IN
UKIDOKAN
KICKBOXING

ATTENDED
HIS OWN
HIGH
SCHOOL
TEN-YEAR
REUNION IN
1994

NINE

THE NUMBER OF MOVIES HE'S
MADE WITH FORMER COLLEGE
ROOMMATE JEREMY PIVEN

- ONE CRAZY SUMMER,
- ELVIS STORIES,
- SAY ANYTHING...,
- THE PLAYER,
- FLOUNDERING,
- THE GRIFFERS,
- GROSSE POINTE BLANK,
- SERENDIPITY,
- RUNAWAY JURY



THE CULT OF

KIM NEWMAN

The critic and novelist on this month's weirdest straight-to-video picks

WHAT EXACTLY IS the demographic for gruesome contemporary horror films built on the ruins of 50-year-old kids' TV franchises? Outside of me, of course. I assume there is one, since *The Banana Splits Movie* and *Saturday Morning Massacre* both fit in this peculiar box, providing handy examples of the right (ish) and wrong (definitely) way to go about mixing mutilation and nostalgia.

In the alternative universe of *The Banana Splits*, the 1968-'70 acid-coloured Hanna-Barbera freakout hosted by four slapstick musicians in baggy animal suits, the show is still running decades later — only to be cancelled the very day that the Splits' biggest fan, a kid who ought to be into Marvel movies, is taken to a taping of the show by his devoted mom. Drooper, Fleegle, Bingo and Snorky — animatronics with killbot sub-routines just waiting to be activated — take the news of impending unemployment badly and recruit a literal captive kid audience while slaughtering nasty grown-ups who're out to spoil their fun. Directed by Danishka Esterhazy, whose more serious dystopian drama *Level 16* is worth a look, it's a lumbering oddity, but undeniably unique and odd. If you find horrid people being done away with by gallumphing, giant, furry robots to that infectious *tra la la* song heard in *Kick-Ass* at all amusing, this gets a pass despite its rough-round-the-edges feel.

Spencer Parsons' *Saturday Morning Massacre* tries something similar as squabbling, unpleasant analogues of the cast of *Scooby-Doo*, *Where Are You?* blunder through a haunted-house mystery that turns nasty. Beloved children's characters murdering awful people has a Willy Wonka-ish



CULT HERO OF THE MONTH CHAD ARCHIBALD

Canada's Black Fawn might not be well known, but it's turned out a wide variety of low-budget horror films with a distinctively off-kilter, wintery, imaginative tone for nearly 15 years. Chad Archibald, Black Fawn's supremo, has written and directed *The Drownsman*, *Ejecta*, *The Heretics* and this month's outstanding *I'll Take Your Dead*. He's also scripted the two minimalist apocalypse *Antisocial* films and produced slightly more straight-ahead genre pieces like *Sweet Karma*, *The Sublet* and *Bed Of The Dead*, plus the indescribably bizarre *Septic Man*. Black Fawn specialises in flesh-creeping transmutations — like the doppelgänger clawing out of the heroine's body in *Let Her Out* or the bachelorette turned into a giant insect in *Bite*. Its distinctive mumblecore indie tone is unusual amid so many flip slashers and spooks, with a sense that its horrors reflect modern malaises of various kinds.

moral appeal, but pitching equally beloved cartoons into a *Wrong Turn* sequel and having them tortured and mangled (even the dog) comes across as merely mean-spirited. The reverse of a spoof, it takes something lightweight and plays for grimness — but feels in no way like a good time. The mainstream *Scooby-Doo* franchise did better by taking a more grown-up approach in the terrific *Mystery Incorporated* cartoon series — two seasons available — which offer more radical ideas (including Udo Kier as an evil parrot) than anything this meagre £2 supermarket purchase DVD manages.

You didn't think we were getting through 2019 with just the one Manson Family movie, did you? It says something about the case that, even before *Once Upon A Time In Hollywood*, filmmakers wanted to weave in counterfactuals with less dreadful endings. In Mary Harron's *Charlie Says*, Leslie Van Houten (Hannah Murray) briefly imagines taking off with a friendly biker rather than sticking with Manson (Matt Smith) and ending up in prison with her two infuriatingly happy co-murderers — “The guards love them,” laments their therapist (Merritt Wever) — after the well-known crimes. It's a thoughtful picture with a clutch of excellent performances, stressing the brainwashing element of the cult and the horrible paradox that deprogramming the culprits means waking them up to the mind-destroying enormity of their crimes. Much trashier is *The Haunting Of Sharon Tate* from writer-director Daniel Farrands (who gave you *The Amityville Murders* and *The Murder Of Nicole Brown Simpson*, whether you wanted them or not). Here, Sharon (Hilary Duff) suffers premonitions of doom and goes through multiple versions of that terrible night in August 1969. Exactly as tasteless as you might expect, it does include a Scenes We'd Like To See alternate reality more daring than anything in the Tarantino film, as Sharon Tate and her friends fight back and slaughter the hippie home invaders.

Illustration: Neil Edwards. Black Fawn



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**BANGILY
BANG!**

Crash course

JIM CUMMINGS made his first movie, *Thunder Road*, for no money and with no experience. You can too. Here's how

JIM CUMMINGS IS a writer. A director. An actor. A producer. An editor. And a composer. Yet before his debut film, *Thunder Road*, a slow-burn, pitch-black, funnier-than-it-sounds dramedy about a small-town cop having a breakdown in the wake of his mother's death, he was none of those things. Now, he's keen to inspire others to follow in his footsteps. So here, exclusively for *Empire*, is Jim Cummings' guide to how you — yes, you — can become the next Jim Cummings.

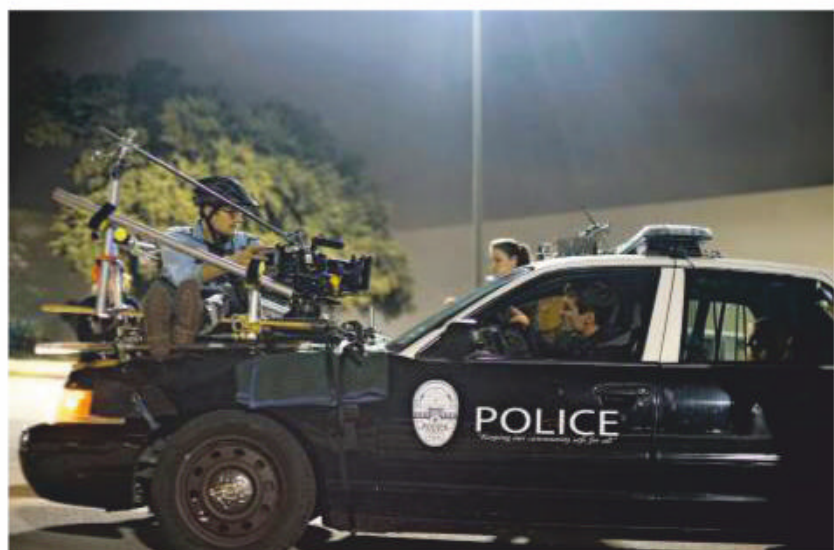
1 PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

"The first hurdle to get over is inadequacy. That's natural in every industry. It comes about from inexperience and naivety. People shouldn't hold themselves back with thoughts of, 'I can't do this,' or, 'This will never happen.' Think, *I have* a story to tell. *I should* put pen to paper. It takes making short films or sketches to build up the confidence to say, 'I can make

something that's a feature.' I made ten short films as a writer, director and actor, including a version of *Thunder Road*, before embarking on my first feature as a writer, director and actor. And all that was slowly chipping away at the wall of anxiety and inadequacy."

2 ACT IF YOU HAVE TO

"I acted in the short film version of *Thunder Road* because I didn't know anybody. When you're making your first movie, it's difficult to convince anyone who's talented to come and work with you. So, because I was the dude who cared about the movie's success more than anybody, I did it. I did two months of rehearsal for the funeral scene, driving in my car and crying and acting the whole thing out a thousand times so that it was muscle memory by the time I showed up on set. If I hired somebody, I couldn't ensure that was going to be the case."



3 WRITE HOW YOU WANT TO WRITE

"I'm not a great screenwriter. I don't like screenplay format. I think it's archaic. I think it's a good blueprint, but people misinterpret screenplays all the time. I submitted the *Thunder Road* script to The Black List, I got three reviews and two of them were three out of ten. You don't need to be a good screenwriter. As Tarantino once said, 'I didn't go to film school, I went to films.'"

4 RECORD THE SCRIPT AS A PODCAST

"Don't let people misinterpret your script. Record it as a podcast and make sure it's going to work over a 90-minute audio duration. If it works in audio format, it'll probably work in visual format. Don't spend time imagining how it's going to come out of human vocal chords. Get it on its feet. Start doing it and you'll find

Top to bottom: Officer Jim Arnaud (Jim Cummings) opens *Thunder Road* with a eulogy at his mother's funeral; The mental cracks begin to show; Arnaud with Officer Nate Lewis (Nican Robinson). **Left:** Cummings raised funds for *Thunder Road*'s production via a Kickstarter campaign.

what's good. But I'm not going to release the *Thunder Road* podcast. I play every character. I play a nine-year-old girl and act against myself, recorded in a closet. Maybe I'll send it to Julian Assange, and he can release it."

5 CONTROL THE MEANS OF PRODUCTION

"It's the democratisation of filmmaking over the years. People have a camera in their pocket. They have an editing machine in their pocket as well. We can now make movies on our own. I'm shooting a big studio movie right now and legitimately for the pick-up shots, I got my little DSLR out and shot the scenes on that. Shoot short films. Shoot stuff on your iPhone, even if they're sketches. Even if it's just you and a tripod, at least then you'll understand how to edit things together and tell a story like that."

6 CONTROL THE MEANS OF DISTRIBUTION

“It’s such a predatory system. The people you’re selling your movie to say, ‘Let us distribute it because you’ve got to do your next movie. We’ll try to get you a two-picture deal.’ Then they take all of your rights. As I kept making stuff, we posted online, like I was a YouTube influencer or something — just putting out content every couple of months got us an audience. Nobody in Hollywood was going to give us any money. We had Kickstarter campaigns for shorts, so I tried one for a feature. We raised \$34,000 in 12 days, which was enough to get going for pre-production.”

7 CUT YOUR CLOTH TO SUIT

“There’s a great joke among producers. ‘How many producers does it take to screw in a lightbulb?’ ‘Does it have to be a lightbulb?’ *Thunder Road* had a scene in a police station. Does it have to be a police station? No. It has to be a wall with a blue line on it, and a desk, and we have to have two dudes dressed as police officers walk and cross the frame. It’s literally in a warehouse that we got for two grand, instead of the 15 or 20 it would cost for a whole police station. We put in the sound design of a police station and you’d never know.”

8 GET THE BLESSING OF BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

“For the *Thunder Road* short, I used the original song because that’s what the character would do. I didn’t think about it. It’s one long take, I couldn’t cut it out. Then, when it won in Sundance, I was like, “Nobody is going to be able to see this thing.” So I reached out to Springsteen, and he saw it. He said, ‘Put it online. Give me \$1,000 and you can use it.’ Recently, Patti, his significant other, said, ‘We just watched the full feature in our living room. It’s beautiful.’ All that paid off because the guy watched it. It’s a love letter to him and everything he’s been doing for the last 40 years.” **CHRIS HEWITT**

THUNDER ROAD IS OUT NOW ON DVD
AND DOWNLOAD

THE FIRST TAKE CLUB

Classic movies, seen for the very first time



THIS MONTH

SCREENWRITER **JOE BARTON** SAYS HELLO TO HIS LITTLE FRIEND — **AL PACINO/BRIAN DE PALMA'S SCARFACE** — FOR THE FIRST TIME



IT’S TAKEN ME 34 years to see *Scarface*, surprisingly, given that it centres around two of my favourite things — doing cocaine and shouting at people. I actually thought that I had seen this film but it turned out I’d just fallen asleep in front of the telly and woken up halfway through *Carlito’s Way*. But even without having technically watched *Scarface*, it was easy to feel like I had. The poster and “Say hello to my little friend” have entered the cultural lexicon and the whole thing induced an almost Proustian memory of playing *GTA: Vice City* as a teenager, to the extent that whenever Pacino walked past a car I instinctively pressed triangle on my PlayStation controller to try and make him steal it.

Tony Montana has become something of an icon, with his crazy suits and all his money and his being-married-to-Michelle-Pfeiffer-ness. So I was surprised when it turns out *Scarface* is actually an incredibly fucking depressing film about a horrible little shit. I did a quick Google search for “Tony Montana tattoos” after I finished it. There are a lot. Perhaps I’m drastically misreading this film (entirely possible) but... really?

A basic analysis is that it’s about the American dream gone sour. Interestingly, it never really shows Tony enjoying his success. As soon as he starts to make money he spends it in the world’s grimmest nightclub where he seems to be having a terrible time, even before someone tries to murder him there. Then he marries Michelle Pfeiffer’s Elvira, who despises him from the moment they

meet to the moment she leaves. Then he locks himself in a mansion with mountains of drugs and no natural sunlight and gets shot more times than Sonny Corleone, Bonnie and Clyde and RoboCop combined. He also buys a tiger at one point but not even that seems to cheer him up. Compare it to something like *GoodFellas*, which made being a criminal look like huge fun for a while (they make pasta sauce in jail!). Here, there’s none of that and I think it’s a braver film for it. *GoodFellas*’ most technically impressive sequence involves Ray Liotta being nice to backroom staff and getting a good seat in a nightclub; *Scarface*’s involves Al Pacino watching his friend get chainsaw-ed to death in a bathtub. Therein lies the difference.

So the basic story is a rags-to-riches-to-floating-face-down-in-the-water feature. Tony gets to America and sets about trying to launch a criminal empire, joined by his perpetually horny mate Manny. I liked Manny. There hasn’t been a more obviously doomed randy-gangster-sidekick since Charlie off *Casualty* cracked on to Helen Mirren in *The Long Good Friday*. Manny is eventually undone by falling in love with Tony’s sister Gina. I feel like the people with Tony Montana tattoos are conveniently ignoring his relationship with Gina, which is violently oppressive at best and violently-oppressive-but-also-pretty-fucking-incestuous at worst.

This might also be the most Al Pacino movie that Al Pacino has ever Al Pacino’d in. I think you’re legally obliged to describe him as a *tour de force*, or considering how many drugs he’s on, a tour de France (pause for applause). Although it’s easy to concentrate on the “Say hello to my little friend”-ness of it all, there are some more subtle choices being made for the character. When Tony visits his mum and Gina after several years away he slouches in his seat like a sulking schoolboy, his desire to be welcomed home as a returning hero dashed by his mother’s desire to tell him off for acting the twat.

The whole thing feels incredibly operatic. Brian De Palma has never directed a scene he didn’t think could be improved with a long, epic establishing shot. There are more cranes in this

film than a *Frasier* reunion. Also it was written by Oliver Stone. Oliver bloody Stone! Can you image how off their tits everyone must have been making this. The wrap party must have been insane. For all we know, it’s still going on.

In summary — I think this is a surprisingly intelligent film that has been culturally reduced to a five-second clip of Al Pacino blowing people up with a grenade launcher. I’m probably never going to watch it again. But I do still want to find out how *Carlito’s Way* starts.



MY DAYS OF MERCY IS OUT NOW ON DVD
AND DOWNLOAD

THE STORY OF THE SHOT

How iconic
images came
to life



Psycho

PSYCHO'S SHOWER SCENE is Ground Zero for cinematic terror. "It was the first time in the history of the movies where it wasn't safe to be in the movie theatre," remembered critic-turned-filmmaker Peter Bogdanovich. "There is enough blood on screen to satisfy the most bloodthirsty movie fan," offered *The Hollywood Reporter*. Nearly 60 years on, Marion Crane's (Janet Leigh) shower slaughter is the most intense 45 seconds you can imagine and perhaps the most famous single scene in film history. It spawned untold parodies (*Scream Queens*' version featured Janet Leigh's daughter Jamie Lee Curtis), an entire documentary about its creation (*78/52*, the number of set-ups and shots), and gifted the world the international hand gesture for scary/crazy behaviour: a stabbing motion, accompanied by Bernard Herrmann's violin shrieks,

As cinematic as it feels, the scene had its origins in Robert Bloch's 1959 source novel. "I had the notion that

a person is never more defenceless than when in the shower, naked in a confined space," Bloch told interviewer Stephen Rebello. "I hit upon a device that worked in print, ending the chapter by having a shower curtain flung aside, the knife cut of her scream and her head." Hitchcock later told interviewer François Truffaut that "the suddenness of the murder in the shower" was his entire motivation to make the movie.

The scene was shot over seven days starting on 18 December 1959 on Stage 18-A at Revue Studios. The finished set — blinding white tiles, gleaming fixtures, an opaque curtain — had four detachable walls to allow the cameras in. Leigh recalls Hitchcock's specific direction about how she should wash herself, not cleaning away dirt but cleansing the guilt. "The shower was a baptism, a taking away of the torment from her mind. She becomes a virgin again." Of course, Hitchcock wielded the retractable plastic

Janet Leigh as Marion Crane, about to meet a legendarily grisly end.

knife himself.

Urban legends abound about the scene. Janet Leigh was not completely naked on set — costumer Rita Riggs used moleskin over her breasts and, to use Leigh's phrase, "the vital part". Anthony Perkins didn't dress up in drag as Mother — Perkins was rehearsing a play so stuntwoman Margo Epper pulled back the curtain. The oft-repeated idea that you never see the knife penetrate the skin is a fallacy: Richard Anobile's 1974 frame-by-frame analysis confirmed blade-puncturing-flesh action. And perhaps the most pervasive *Psycho* myth of all argues title designer Saul Bass directed the sequence. It's true Hitchcock paid Bass an extra \$2,000 to come up with storyboards and he even shot proof-of-concept footage. Yet despite the title designer's claims, practically every crew member attests to Hitchcock being the only one giving direction. But the debate has never gone away — just like the power of the scene itself.

IAN FREER

PSYCHO IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY
AND DOWNLOAD

INSTANT TRIVIA



1

The iconic close-up of the shower head spurting water at the camera was captured on a long lens — so it could be further away — and used a huge shower head, its inner holes blocked so the water would spray round the lens.

2

Hitchcock told the press he created a rubber torso that spurted blood for the gory bits. The reality was more prosaic — make-up artists Jack Barron and Robert Dawn shot chocolate syrup from a squeeze-y bottle.

3

To create the stabbing sounds, prop man Robert Bone brought watermelons, casabas, cantaloupes and honeydews to knife. The melons were then auditioned, Hitchcock listening with his eyes closed. Casabas won.

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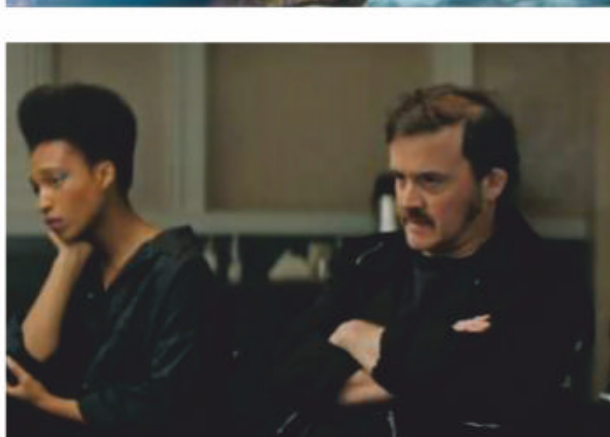
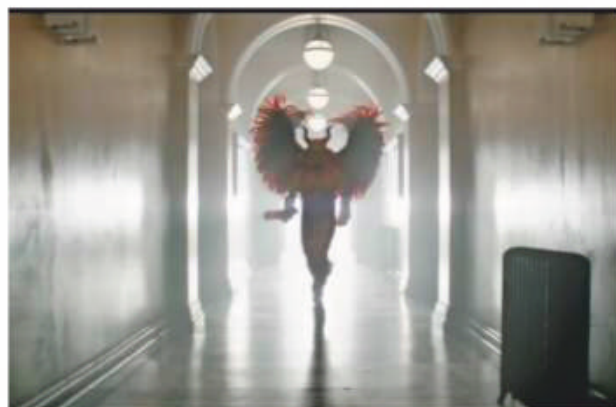
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Rocketman

THE TAGLINE FOR Dexter Fletcher's *Rocketman* was "Based on a true fantasy". Which just about sums up the life of its subject, one Elton John, but also gave Fletcher all kinds of artistic licence to play around with the details — chronological or otherwise — of John's life and career. The result is one of the freshest musicals and biopics in years, with a number of standout sequences.

MEET ELTON

"I wanted to make something as impactful and arresting as possible," says Fletcher of the film's opening shot, in which Elton (Taron Egerton) storms through a set of doors in full-on, gloriously over-the-top feathered regalia. What we don't know at this point is that Elton is on his way to

rehab. "I was trying to create an illusion that you're backstage at a gig," adds Fletcher of the misdirect. "The aim of the movie is to try to keep flipping that biopic idea on its head. There are going to be surprises."

THE CONFESSION

Immediately after, we then see the middle-aged Elton — still in his costume, though shorn of much of his bravado and swagger — confess to, among other things, being a drug addict, an alcoholic, and a sex addict. "He has to lay out what his seven deadly sins are, so we'll go on this journey with him while he unpacks it," says Fletcher. "He's fucked up. He's trying not to cry, he's laughing, he's laughing at himself, he's angry, there are so many different things in that one moment. It's a tour de force performance. Taron was so connected to it. That's why I play it in one shot. I let us see who he is."

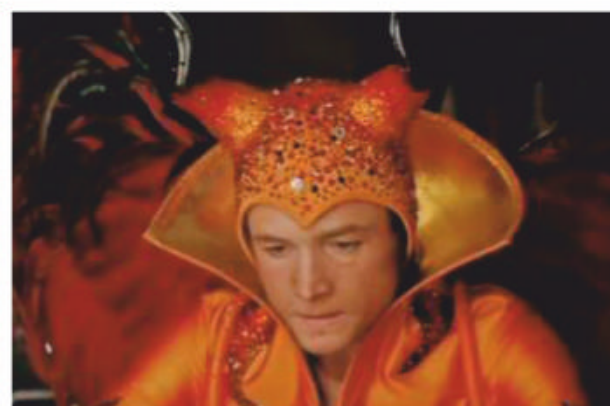
SATURDAY DWIGHT'S ALRIGHT

After a brief sojourn into Elton's childhood, Fletcher re-introduces Egerton as Elton during

a raucous rendition of 'Saturday Night's Alright For Fighting'. Only this is a much younger Elton — before the drink and drugs, and before he was even called Elton. Here, we see a young Reg Dwight dance and sing and fight his way through a complex number that is executed in a single shot. "You haven't seen the young, vibrant, up-for-anything Elton yet," says Fletcher. "It's about that young man escaping his youth and escaping the shackles of being that kid in the pub, plonking out numbers." The theatrical version was cut for length — the full version, including a bit where Reg rides around on bumper cars, can be seen on the DVD, along with the uncut version of the 'Honky Cat' sequence, featuring Egerton and Richard Madden tap-dancing on a giant, spinning gold record.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Keen to escape his past, Reg Dwight conjures up a brand-new name for himself while sitting in the office of record company boss Dick James (Stephen Graham). Having already nicked the



'Elton' part from a former bandmate called Elton Dean, in this moment Fletcher has Elton complete the set by looking, serendipitously, at a picture of John Lennon. "He could have been Elton Ringo!" laughs Fletcher. "It's a sort of half-truth. Elton was on tour with Long John Baldry and took 'John' as a tribute to him, but then I'd have had to introduce Long John Baldry. But I read another version where he saw a picture of John Lennon and took his name from there. I choose to believe that."

WE ALL FLOAT DOWN HERE

Dispatched to the Troubadour by Dick James for his first LA gigs, something magical happens. As Elton launches into 'Crocodile Rock' (which he actually hadn't written by this point), both he and the entire audience float into the air, transported by the music. This is the moment where Elton becomes a superstar. "I knew I had to find something dynamic to express what it can feel like when you hit a rich seam, in the moment," explains Fletcher. "It's a rare experience. It's like flying, and nothing

else seems to matter." The floating effect involved the first couple of rows of audience members being lifted into the air, en masse, by a hydraulic framework. The rows behind? "They're on boxes. They bent their knees and stood up. It's very analogue!"

LIFT-OFF

The film's creative highpoint comes in the audacious sequence revolving around the title track. Audacious because it's the soundtrack to Elton's suicide attempt where, full of pills, he tried to drown himself at his LA home. The most startling moment comes when Elton is rushed to hospital and Fletcher stages the attempt to pump his stomach and save his life as a dance number, with doctors and nurses dancing while silhouetted against a large window. "That was the most elaborate transition I could devise within a musical number," he admits. "How do I transition from someone who's being pulled off a gurney, and being reassembled and pushed out on stage?" Fletcher found the answer in the location — not a Los Angeles hospital,

but a vacant Post Office sorting office in Greenford. "It was inspired by that huge window. Someone walked in front of it, and I thought, 'This is it.'"

HE'S STILL STANDING

The film ends with the only blow-by-blow recreation of a moment from Elton's life: the video for 'I'm Still Standing', which he shot after leaving rehab. "That's when it becomes a biopic, at the end," says Fletcher. "I wanted to connect our fantasy retelling of his life to a very real moment in his life." Initially, Fletcher wanted to head down to Cannes, where the video was shot, and recreate it completely, but in the end, "We just shot Taron and laid him over Elton. It is the video. Everyone else in the video was originally there." Including a now-famous face. Pause it at just the right moment and you can make out *Strictly Come Dancing* judge, Bruno Tonioli. What would Len Goodman think?

CHRIS HEWITT

ROCKETMAN IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY, 4K AND DOWNLOAD

THE RANKING

Four *Empire* writers.
Ten movies.
Ordered
definitively.

FILMS OF 1989

Chris: 1989, then. The year that saw the launch of a movie magazine called *Empire*. What were we doing in 1989?

Terri: I was ten. Everything I wanted to see was a 12. At that age, you're just obsessed with how do I get into a 12? The answer in my case was an MC Hammer pantsuit from Tammy Girl and a perm with loads of hairspray. So 1989, I started going to the pictures.

Chris: The pictures. This is 1989, not 1959.

Terri: I'm from the North. I'm working class.

Ian: In 1989, I was in my second year of doing a degree in film at the Polytechnic of Central London, whose most famous alumnus is Asif Kapadia. I was making really terrible short films and writing good essays. Grade A essays. I was

watching a lot.

Chris: Did you continue your writing on film? Is there anywhere we can read your work?

Ian: It didn't work out for me.

Helen: I was also at school and getting into film a bit more so. I remember going to see *Batman* with my dad when we were on holiday in Newcastle, County Down. I was very excited to see it. Last time I was excited for a *Batman* film. Kidding! You know I love them really.

Chris: Some of them. With caveats.

Helen: It was a good year. Going back over this list, a lot of the films from that year are among my favourites.

Chris: *Batman* changed the game. There are better films than *Batman*, but when I think of 1989 I think of that

Batman logo.

Helen: It was massive.

Ian: The *Batman* logo with 11 August on it, that's what I remember. That's iconic.

Helen: The Prince music was everywhere. It seemed to dominate the summer. It might just have been me.

Terri: It did \$100 million in ten days, which at the time was a record. These days it doesn't sound massive, but it was absolutely huge and was the start of that sense of a real blockbuster, of something gaining traction that quickly.

Ian: It feels like the first franchise movie.

Chris: I think its place in cinema history is assured.

Ian: I can't get away from the fact that it looks absolutely like it was shot in Britain. It just looks like Britain. It never

OUR CRITICS



CHRIS HEWITT

Says *Empire* issue 2 sparked his love of film, which led — 30 years later — to this...



IAN FREER

Big fan of 1989, in particular the Taylor Swift album of the same name.



HELEN O'HARA

Would have voted for *The Little Mermaid*, but that came out here in 1990. Huh.



TERRI WHITE

Once saw *The Delinquents* with a can of hairspray stuffed down her pants.



Illustration: Jacey

looks like Gotham City.

Chris: What films do you associate most with 1989?

Helen: *When Harry Met Sally*. I was way too young to enjoy that in 1989, but it's an astonishing film.

Helen: We don't talk enough about Rob Reiner's 1980s.

Chris: It's an amazing run.

Helen: The man made *The Princess Bride*, *Stand By Me*, *This Is Spinal Tap* and *When Harry Met Sally*. That's an incredible career right there.

When Harry Met Sally is a practically perfect film in every way. It's a romcom that manages not to patronise either party, which most romcoms do in one way or another.

Chris: Patronising means talking down to someone, by the way.

Helen: Thanks, Chris.

Terri: It's a perfect romcom.

It's one of those rare ones which gets the comedy as right as the romance. It's a series of beautiful vignettes. It is a fullhearted celebration of love. It covers the awkwardness and the cynicism but it's committed to being about love, which I think makes it desperately optimistic and desperately beautiful. Ooh, let's watch it now!

Chris: When you realise that you want to spend the afternoon with *When Harry Met Sally*, you want that afternoon to start right away. And it hasn't been overpowered by its most iconic scene, the orgasm-faking scene.

Terri: I used to live four blocks from Katz's Deli and I'd go in for coffee every morning and there would be people queuing up to ask to sit at the table that Meg Ryan sat at. There is something enduring about this film.

Chris: One film that is contentious is *Die Hard*. It came out in this country on 3 February 1989, but came out in the States in 1988. When Terri told me that, it automatically became for me the best film of 1989, even though I don't associate it with 1989. It's a masterpiece, isn't it?

Ian: Yeah. It's perfect.

Chris: I think the screenplay should be taught in film school. It's an amazing script that fleshes out its hero and villain but also has an incredible supporting cast.

Ian: Johnson and Johnson — that's a nothing-y thing in any other thriller.

Helen: The fact that they're still riffing on *Die Hard* in deleted scenes from *Avengers: Endgame* is a plaudit.

Terri: It is a perfect action movie. It felt like a hero and a villain you'd never seen before. McClane is not a huge, buff, super soldier guy. He's an average guy in the wrong place at the wrong time, or the right place at the right time.

Helen: It's Alan Rickman's

first feature film.

Terri: How mad is that?

Helen: What a way to start. If he'd never done anything else, he'd still go down as one of the greats. And he went on to do so much more.

Chris: Nothing as good, though.

Helen: How dare you.

Chris: Name a film that Alan Rickman did that was better than *Die Hard*.

Helen: *Robin Hood: Prince Of Thieves*.

Chris: You lie, and you sign yourself to lies. *Indiana Jones And The Last Crusade* is a glorious piece of filmmaking.

Helen: It is so good. Its wonderful prologue sparked the whole trend for prequels.

I can't hold that against it because it's River Phoenix as Young Indy, and I adore it with my whole heart. It was so clever and funny that it's singlehandedly responsible for all the shit we've had to sit through since where there's no suspense, because we know what's going to happen.

Ian: That's my 1989 film. The film I saw the most. The film I was looking forward to the most. I still don't think it's the best one of the four.

Chris: Only a brave and foolhardy soul would make that claim.

Ian: It's the funniest of the four. The middle section, the wit between Connery and Ford, is terrific. It's so much fun. It really is.

Chris: Terri, you've been very quiet on this one.

Terri: I haven't confessed this before, but *Indiana Jones*...? I mean...?

Helen: Burn the witch!

Terri: I don't get it. My brother used to love them when we were little. I thought this one was a bit silly.

Ian: She chose poorly.

Terri: There's going to be a group with pitchforks coming after me.

Ian: I'm at the fucking front of it.

Chris: Right, enough squabbling. Let's vote!

THE TOP TEN

1



WHEN HARRY MET SALLY (1989)

Terri: "Simply the greatest romcom of all time."

Ian: "John McTiernan's thriller does everything right. Every action set-piece, small moment and supporting character registers meaning."



3



INDIANA JONES AND THE LAST CRUSADE (1989)

Chris: "Indy's relationship with his dad is witty, complex and moving."

4



DO THE RIGHT THING (1989)

Ian: "Spike Lee's best film is a Molotov cocktail of a movie. But it is still smart, funny and deeply human."

5



BATMAN (1989)

Terri: "The significance of this film for franchises and comic book movies can't be overstated."

6



BACK TO THE FUTURE PART II (1989)

Terri: "A prescient look at our modern-day hellscape."

7



DEAD POETS SOCIETY (1989)

Helen: "Peter Weir's BAFTA winner sees Robin Williams perfectly balance comedy and tragedy."

8



SEX, LIES, AND VIDEOTAPE (1989)

Ian: "A sly comedy of bad manners, Steven Soderbergh's calling card is the gold standard of US indie cinema."

9



THE 'BURBS (1989)

Chris: "Joe Dante's pitch-black comedy boasts a performance I say is Tom Hanks' finest. I know, I'm weird."

10



HEATHERS (1989)

Helen: "The boldest teen movie ever made still looks as fresh as a daisy and is as disturbing as ever."

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10 OF THE BEST

Team *Empire* on
the month's essential
movies

PICK OF
THE MONTH



ROCKETMAN

OUT NOW / CERT 15 / 116 MINS

DVD BR

After doing a patch job on *Bohemian Rhapsody*, Dexter Fletcher gets to show what he can really do when given free reign with the story of a pop icon. From minute one, his Elton John biopic — or musical with biopic leanings — cranks up the camp, imagination and music to maximum volume. It doesn't take the polite blind-eye view of John's life, but puts a spotlight on his drug

addiction, alcoholism, sex addiction and bone-deep insecurity, pulling darker meaning from the lyrics of hits like 'Your Song', 'Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me' and 'Goodbye Yellow Brick Road'. Taron Egerton forcefully makes the case that no other actor could have played this role. What makes Fletcher's film so brilliant is that he's never winking at the audience or suggests he thinks any of this is silly. Even in *Rocketman*'s most absurd and stylised moments, he believes in it, and means it, wholeheartedly. **OLLY RICHARDS**



DEADWOOD: THE MOVIE

OUT NOW (DOWNLOAD), 7 OCTOBER (DVD) / CERT 18 / 110 MINS

DVD

Unceremoniously gunned down in 2006 after just three seasons on TV, *Deadwood* returns via this feature-length finale that is less concerned about wrapping up the narrative comprehensively than it is reminding us how much fun it is to spend time with Ian McShane's Al Swearengen, Timothy Olyphant's Seth Bullock, Paula Malcomson's Trixie and the other residents of the scrappy South Dakota mining community. A decade has passed in camp time, and while some have moved on or prospered, the years haven't been kind to all. And the future is riding towards them, in the form of an old nemesis, businessman (now senator) George Hurst, played by Gerald McRaney, who has modern designs on the town he once threatened to destroy. The dialogue remains as joyously idiosyncratic as ever, soaring and dipping between the Shakespearean heavens and the fantastically foul-mouthed gutter. **JAMES WHITE**



MIDSOMMAR

OUT 28 OCTOBER / CERT 18 / 147 MINS

DVD BR

Few horrors are as sun-drenched as *Midsommar*, a film deliberately set in northern Sweden where the midnight sun offers no hiding places. Few horrors contain as many smiling threats, full of hospitality and good cheer even as they burn you alive in the skin of a dead bear. And few horrors have as much to say about destructive relationships, mental health, and family, with such suffocating intensity. There really are very few horror directors like Ari Aster, who (much like Jordan Peele) seems to have confirmed his status as a master of the genre in his second film (after the equally impressive *Hereditary*), offering jaw-dropping visual iconography, a tone that quivers like a needle between the fears and the funnies (the sex scene is one for the ages), and themes that you'll chew on long after the staggering, enigmatic-smiling finale. As the Swedes would say: "Skogstokig!" **JOHN NUGENT**



NIGHTBREED

OUT 28 OCTOBER / CERT 15 / 145 MINS

BR

"The *Star Wars* of horror films," or at least that's what director Clive Barker intended it to be, in size, scope and esteemed status. However, *Nightbreed* — based on Barker's book, *Cabal* — sadly failed to resonate with the cinema audiences of 1990, and instead languished at the box office, finding its audience on VHS — as is often the way with these things. The story centres on a young man cursed by vivid dreams of the mystical monster-haven 'Midian', who decides to seek it out and meet the beasts inside, while being pursued by his evil and murderous shrink, played with absolute relish by David Cronenberg. It's effectively a dark horror-movie put into a spin cycle with the X-Men, and it's loads of fun. Touching down in the UK for the first time in HD via Arrow, fans will be able to get their claws on the director's cut, as well as buckets of bloody special features. At last, the night has a hero, indeed. **JOHN RAIN**



AN AMERICAN WEREWOLF IN LONDON

OUT 28 OCTOBER / CERT 18 / 97 MINS

BR

John Landis' pitch-perfect descent into pitch-black comedy is still, after nearly 40 years, without peer. Few films have demonstrated a knack for switching between funny ha ha and fear, sometimes in the space of seconds, as this tale of a young American man (David Naughton) who gets bitten by a werewolf whilst walking on the Yorkshire Moors and finds himself cursed to turn into a member of the Bee Gees every time there's a full moon. Consider the way the initial attack sees Naughton and Griffin Dunne shift suddenly from cracking wise to cracking bones. Or the lunacy of the Nazi zombie dream sequence. And it still has, misshapen hands down, the greatest transformation sequence of all time. And a soundtrack so good you'll howl at the moon. Be warned, though: it may make you cancel plans to visit Yorkshire. Or Tottenham Court Road Tube station, for that matter. **CHRIS HEWITT**



ANGEL HEART

OUT 14 OCTOBER / CERT 18 / 113 MINS

DVD BR

The official drink of New Orleans is the Sazerac, an insanely strong cocktail consisting of rye whiskey, bitters and absinthe. If you necked ten of them, then picked up a camera and staggered around the Big Easy, you still wouldn't be able to make a film as unhinged as *Angel Heart*, Alan Parker's unforgettable bayou-based mystery. Mickey Rourke is the straight man (which says it all) to Robert De Niro's creepy-fingernailed, egg-gobbling antagonist Louis Cypher, his private eye sweating his way around town in an attempt to crack a case. Somebody drowns in a vat of gumbo — it's that kind of tale. Overheated hokum it undeniably is, playing out like *Chinatown* with bonus voodoo and a berserker soundtrack, but it's also a go-for-broke treat, with a climactic reveal that will make you hoot. And probably lunge for the nearest bottles of rye whiskey, bitters and absinthe.

NICK DE SEMLYEN



SUPPORT THE GIRLS

OUT 21 OCTOBER / CERT 15 / 93 MINS

DVD

It's shift time at Double Whammies, the Hooters-esque setting for *Support The Girls*, and Regina Hall's general manager Lisa is already crying in her car. The cause of her tears is uncredited, but as her day descends into a medley of marital trouble, institutionalised misogyny and a dodgy Stephen Curry tattoo predicament, it's clear that Lisa's life is far from easy. Britain has yet to feel the full impact of the 'breastaurant' industry, but to look upon the sticky bartops of Double Whammies is to know any thankless job where you're paid less to work more. Director Andrew Bujalski captures the nuanced troubles of Lisa's mother hen skilfully, but this is Hall's show, who delivers a career-topping, gently funny ode to the everywoman, whose story is seldom seen on screen and should be celebrated when performed as powerfully and with such sensitivity as this. **BETH WEBB**



HIGH NOON

OUT NOW / CERT U / 85 MINS

BR

When *High Noon* came out in 1952, American cinemagoers hadn't seen a Western like it. Gone were the heroic townspeople and romantic Technicolor vistas of the classic post-war oater. Instead they got an American West rotten at its core, a film in which a gun isn't fired until the final sweat-drenched minutes, and in poor, haunted marshall Will Kane (an anguished Gary Cooper) a quiet hero let down by almost everyone around him. No wonder John Wayne went ape. *High Noon*'s genius is to set the clock ticking and have the story play out in real-time. And while much has, rightly, been made of *High Noon* as an allegory for the McCarthy witch-hunts, a broadside against those who had abandoned their colleagues, it owes its enduring place among the true greats to its stunning economy and, in Kane, one the noblest heroes the Golden Age ever produced. **ADAM SMITH**

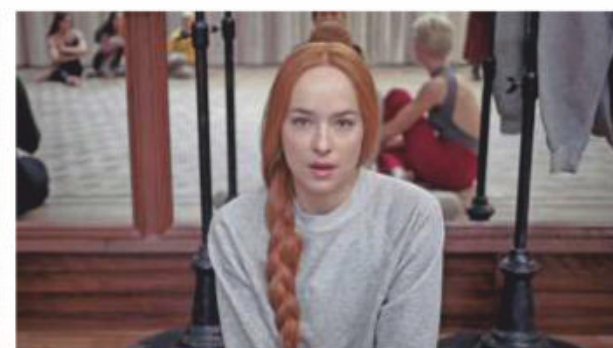


THE DARK HALF

OUT 14 OCTOBER / CERT 18 / 121 MINS

DVD BR

A decade after *Creepshow*, George A. Romero wrote and directed this adaptation of Stephen King's bestseller, starring Oscar-winner Timothy Hutton (*The Haunting Of Hill House*) as writer Thad Beaumont, who is haunted by the physical manifestation of George Stark, the pseudonym he created to write pulp novels, but then 'killed off' — an idea inspired by King's own experiences writing as Richard Bachman. Romero ratchets up the tension and provides some grisly kills as Stark (also Hutton, with a Nick Cave makeover) murders everyone he imagines responsible for killing him off. Hutton couldn't give a bad performance if his life depended on it, Michael Rooker is a sympathetic presence as Castle Rock Sheriff Alan Pangborn, and although the second half suffers from some unconvincing special effects — especially in HD — *The Dark Half* is a fairly faithful adaptation of a half-decent King novel. **DAVID HUGHES**



SUSPIRIA

OUT 7 OCTOBER / CERT 18 / 152 MINS

DVD BR

"Mind-bending" takes on a new meaning in Luca Guadagnino's daring and dangerous *Suspiria*, a modern vision paying homage to Dario Argento's 1977 blood-soaked classic. While the story mostly follows the same routine, Guadagnino skips the warm-ups to throw his dancers (and viewers) into more painful positions than ever before. He swaps searing neon pinks and gorgeous reds for a washed-out, desolate colour palette, he moves from Freiburg to Berlin, and casts Dakota Johnson as his delicate dancer and Tilda Swinton in a stealthy dual role — both troubling and terrific. As Susie Bannion, Johnson navigates the strict dance school like any determined student would, but when its superstitious core opens up, the film does a total 180: this world threatens to swallow Susie whole, and all she — and we — can do is to jump all the way in. **ELLA KEMP**

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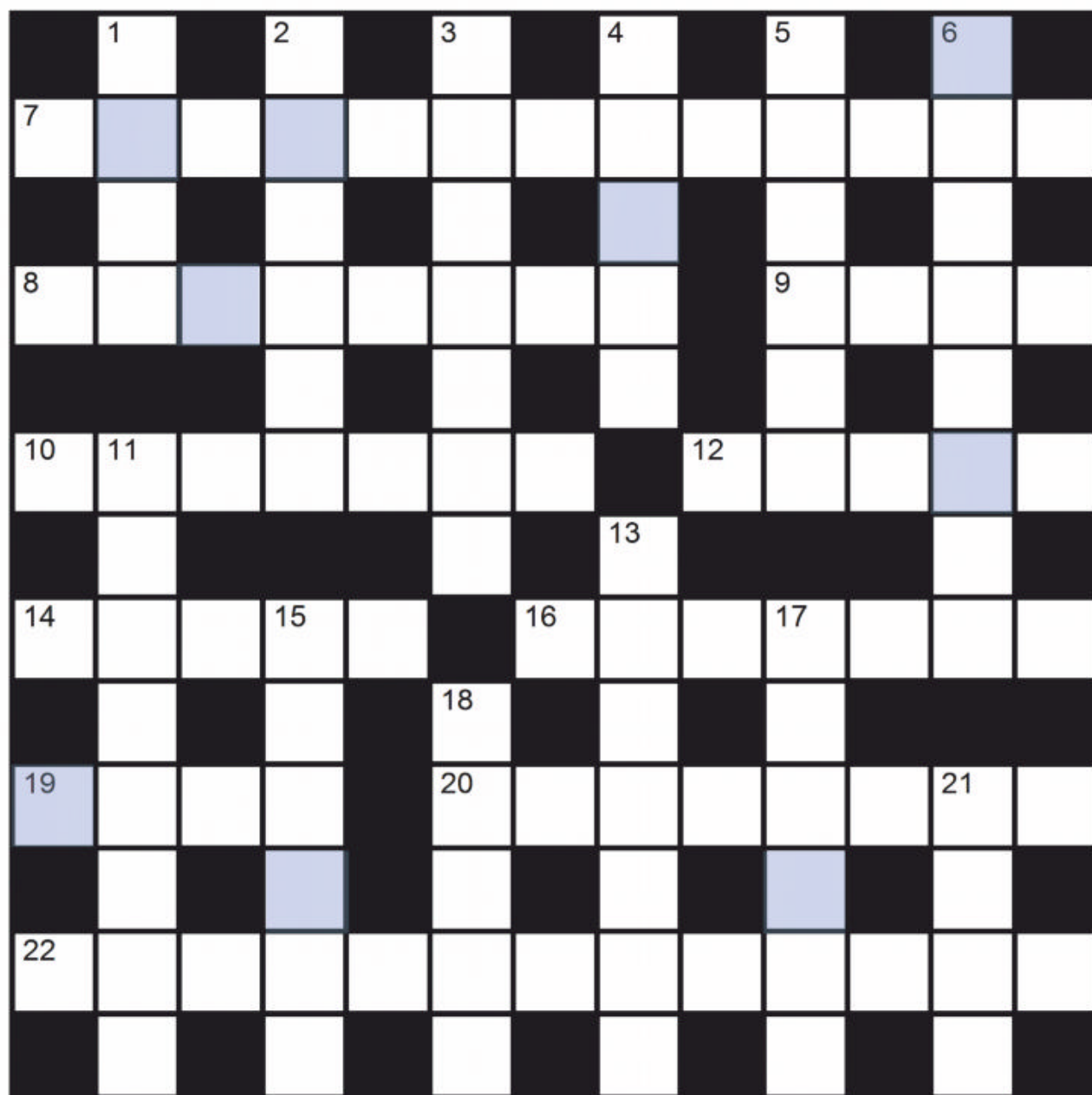


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Richard Linklater's beloved and highly acclaimed *Before Trilogy* — *Before Sunrise*, *Before Sunset* and *Before Midnight* — starring Julie Delpy and Ethan Hawke makes its much-anticipated debut on Criterion Collection Blu-ray this month. To celebrate, we've got a copy of the box set, plus a 49" 4K Ultra HD HDR LED TV and Blu-ray player to watch it on. So if you fancy your chances, crack the crossword, solve the anagrams and text your answer to the number below. Good luck!

THE BEFORE TRILOGY IS OUT ON CRITERION
COLLECTION BLU-RAY ON 28 OCTOBER

ACROSS

- 7 Was Benedict Cumberbatch electrifying in this? (3,7,3)
- 8 In which Elizabeth Taylor was wed to Michael Caine (3,3,2)
- 9 One tagline read "The story of a nobody everybody is watching" (4)
- 10 Huge peepers created by Tim Burton in 2014 (3,4)
- 12 Superhero portrayed by Michael Jai White in 1997 (5)
- 14 Actress Beatie, daughter of Sylvia Sims, who broke out in *Highlander* (5)
- 16 — *Christopher Robin* (Domhnall Gleeson, Margot Robbie) (7)
- 19 In which Mick Jagger put his acting hat on as Greta (4)
- 20 Aussie director Baz (8)
- 22 *The* — ; was this played at Bletchley Park? (9,4)

DOWN

- 1 Elisabeth, Nicolas Cage's *Leaving Las Vegas* co-star (4)
- 2 A chilly period for an animated feature (3,3)
- 3 Clint Eastwood's *Madison County* structures (7)
- 4 Philippe Noiret's corrupt policeman (2,3)
- 5 Meryl, though she was born Mary Louise (6)
- 6 Oliver Reed and Amanda Donohoe's year-long island sojourn (8)
- 11 How Annette Bening had visions of a serial killer (2,6)
- 13 Richard Linklater's 12-year project (7)
- 15 *The Fifth* — ; Bill Condon's Wikileaks thriller (6)
- 17 Louis Malle film for which Miranda Richardson was Oscar-nominated (6)
- 18 Cyborg who proved to be a *Battle Angel* (5)
- 21 Clownfish voiced by Alexander Gould (4)

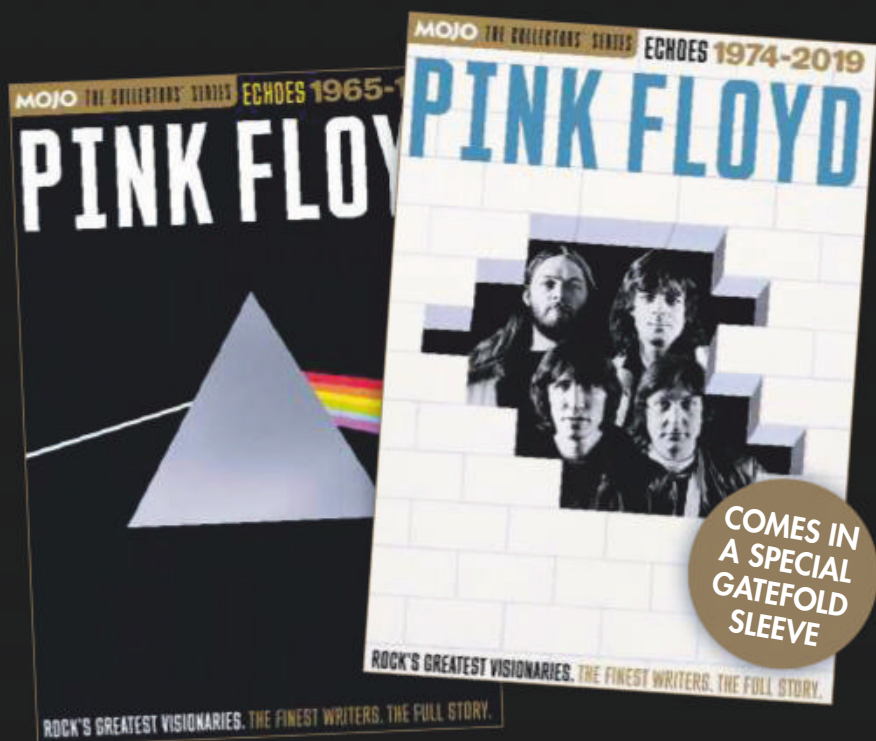
COMPETITION ENDS 28 OCTOBER

HOW TO ENTER Take the letters from each coloured square and rearrange them to form the name of an actor, actress, director or character. Text 'EMPIRE' to 83070, followed by your answer, name and address (with a space between each element of your message!). Texts cost 50p plus standard operator costs. Lines close at midnight, 28 OCTOBER. Winners are selected at random. See below for terms and conditions.

OCTOBER ANSWERS **ACROSS:** 1 Lalo, 3 The Lambs, 9/19 Down Far From Home, 10 O'Neal, 11 Ocean's Eleven, 13 Powder, 15 Martha, 17 Into The Woods, 20 Olsen, 21 Saldana, 22 Early Man, 23 Gere. **DOWN:** 1 Life Of Pi, 2 Lorre, 4 Hamlet, 5 Lionel Atwill, 6 Mae West, 7 Solo, 8 Orange County, 12 Sam Spade, 14 Windsor, 16 The Sea, 18 O'Hare 19 See 9 Across. **ANAGRAM** **MARTIN SCORSESE**

TERMS AND CONDITIONS: One entry per person. Texts cost 50p + standard network rate. Ask the bill payer's permission before entering. Entries must be received before 29 October or will not be valid (but the cost of the text may still be charged). One winner will be selected at random. Competition promoted by Bauer Consumer Media Limited t/a *Empire* ("Empire"). *Empire*'s choice of winner is final and no correspondence will be entered into in this regard. The winner will be notified, by phone (on the number the text was sent), between seven and ten days after the competition ends. *Empire* will call the winner a maximum of three times and leave one message. If the winner does not answer the phone or respond to the message within 14 days of the competition's end, *Empire* will select another winner and the original winner will not win a prize. Entrants must be over 18, resident in the UK and not be employed by *Empire*. The prize is non-negotiable with no cash alternative. *Empire* is not responsible for late delivery or unsatisfactory quality of the prize. Entrants agree to the collection of their personal data in accordance with *Empire*'s privacy policy: <http://www.bauerdatapromise.co.uk/>. Winner's personal details will be given to prize provider to arrange delivery of the prize. Bauer reserves the right to amend or cancel these terms or any aspect of the competition (including the prize) at any time if required for reasons beyond its control. Any questions, please email empire@bauermedia.co.uk. Complaints will not be considered if made more than 30 days after the competition ends. Winner's details available on request (after the competition ends) by emailing empire@bauermedia.co.uk. For full Ts&Cs see <http://www.bauerlegal.co.uk/competition-terms.html>.

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MICHAEL PALIN: "It would be that scene around the table in *GoodFellas*, where Joe Pesci shoots the waiter [Spider, played by Michael Imperioli]. That's such an explosive scene. It's so awful. It's like an explosion, a human explosion. You see how anger works, and how devastatingly dangerous it can be."

INT. BAR — NIGHT

Henry Hill (Ray Liotta) is laughing up a storm at a poker game with his pals, including Jimmy Conway (Robert De Niro) and Tommy DeVito (Joe Pesci). He's just won a hand.

HENRY: Goodbye, Jimmy!

We see a bandaged foot limp across the floor. It belongs to Spider, his first time back at work since Tommy put a bullet in his foot at the last poker game.

JIMMY: Spider, what's your rush?

NICKY: Your credit's no fucking good in here. Fuckin' Drop-along Cassidy.

Spider brings the boys' drinks.

SPIDER: Here you go.

HENRY: Thank you, Spider.

Tommy decides to bust Spider's balls.

TOMMY: Hey, Spider, that bandage on your foot is bigger than your fuckin' head. You know that?

Jimmy gives Spider a note from a wad of cash.

SPIDER: Thank you, Jimmy.

TOMMY: Next thing you know he's gonna be coming in with one of these fuckin' walkers. Even though you got that, you could dance. Give us a little couple of fuckin' steps here, Spider, you fuckin' bullshitter, you. Tell the truth, you're looking for sympathy, is that it, sweetie?

Spider snaps.

SPIDER: Why don't you go fuck yourself, Tommy?

A moment's silence, as they all

process what Spider just said. Tommy sits back, bolt upright, all humour extinguished. After a second, Jimmy starts laughing.

JIMMY: Oh! Did I just fuckin' hear right? Couldn't believe what I just heard.

He peels off another note.

JIMMY: Hey, Spider, here. This is for you. Attaboy. I got respect for this kid. He's got a lot of fuckin' balls. Good for you. Don't take no shit off nobody.

Tommy is staring at Spider, who is making more drinks by the bar. He doesn't say a word.

JIMMY: He shoots him in the foot, he tells him to go fuck himself.

He nudges Tommy with his cash.

JIMMY: Tommy, you gonna let him get away with that? You gonna let this fuckin' punk get away with that? What's the matter with you? What's the world coming to?

Suddenly, Tommy pulls out his gun. He pumps six shots into the chest of Spider, who falls backwards against a bar stool.

TOMMY: That's what the fuckin' world is coming to. How d'ya like that? How's that? Alright?

Jimmy grabs the gun.

JIMMY: What's the fuckin' matter with you? What is the fuckin' matter with you? Are you stupid or what? Tommy, I'm kidding with you. What the fuck are you doing, are you a fuckin' sick maniac?

TOMMY: I don't know if you're kidding, what do you mean you're kidding, you're breaking my fuckin' balls—

JIMMY: I'm fuckin' kidding with you, you fuckin' shoot the guy?

Henry is checking on Spider.

HENRY: He's dead.

JIMMY: Good shot. What do you want from me, I'm a good shot.

